

Chinese Literature

Fiction Poetry Art



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Artemisia

Jia Pingwa

This is a true story about a girl who has been dead these three years. Her team-mates had written to five newspapers in the hope that they would use her story as an example to others, and three reporters had been sent at various times, but they had shaken their heads at the banality of it. She had done nothing outstanding in life and died no heroic death. She was not newsworthy.

Last winter, when chance took me there, her team-mates, finding that I was a writer, almost begged me on their knees to write about her. I inquired, but found her quite commonplace. It took two days living alongside the sixty-three of them to motivate me to write about her. I told them that none of the comfortable men and women in the big cities would take anything a writer produced as other than wild fantasy, however truthfully I wrote, but every one of them told me just to get it written and have it published no matter what anyone thought. Someone would be convinced. I had to comply.

— Author's note

In the south of Gansu Province was a stretch of rolling hills as deep as the sea, so densely forested that neither sun nor moon was very bright, where villages of three or five households stood thirty-five or forty kilometres apart and the inhabitants farmed the gullies and built their houses against the hillsides, a land as mysterious as an unopened walnut.

Then one year the haven was discovered. Oil was found under the forest. A highway was built, bringing traffic and people who

all exclaimed at the beauty of the hills and streams, and in particular at the artemisia that grew everywhere. Slender in its simple beauty, seldom to be seen elsewhere, certainly not in city parks, here it covered the slopes, the riverbanks and the roadsides with yellow, white and red flowers spread out on the ground as if millions of butterflies had alighted fluttering their wings.

Soon workers filled the one hundred kilometres of forest. Buildings went up to house the headquarters and the various prospecting, production and refining teams. Workers on big wages lived among poor peasants, and modern machinery worked beside primitive farm tools. For two years, three years, oil was continually pumped up and shipped out like sweat dripping endlessly from the workers' bodies.

One drilling team had spent three years in the remotest corner of the hills. They had drilled a dozen wells and would continue to do so as if they intended to bore through the earth right there. Most of the team of sixty-four were ex-servicemen, signs of which they displayed in a tunic here, a pair of army trousers there, a cap or a belt. The others from the villages had acquired items of military apparel through barter too, so that at the New Year and other high days and holidays all could sport something yellow.

Life there had more leeway than in the army. Having joined up in the country, spent five tense and womanless years in the army on the Qinghai Plateau and a busy and womanless life here, they had become short-tempered, tough and uninhibited. They couldn't find city wives, although they envied those men whose wives earned a salary, so they married girls from their home towns in Shaanxi, Henan and Shandong, and every year or two with thousands of yuan in their pockets, they went home on leave, while the bachelors ate and squandered their money and tried to play up to the girls in the logistics departments. After a few setbacks they would madly turn their attention to the local girls or drink and fight in the dormitory to let off their excess energy.

They were the most notorious of all the oil teams.

A very capable man, Xizi, was sent to take charge of the team, and he did a good job. In six months, production improved, and no one made trouble outside, but the men still drank, fought and used dirty language. Xizi sent in many reports to headquarters asking for a tough assistant.

Two pieces of good news came in August. First, they won a bonus of five hundred yuan for overfulfilling the previous month's quota; second, someone was coming to their team. The day they received the money the whole team feasted, sitting on the ground outside on

a starry night, tucking into big chunks of meat and wine. On Xizi's suggestion each saved half a bottle of wine for the new-comer. They waited one day, two days, four. No one showed up. They swore and downed what was left in the bottles.

Then the new-comer arrived.

2

Overjoyed, Xizi scurried down the hill and saw a water-tanker climbing up amid a cloud of dust. Shouting, he ran up to shake the hand of the person who jumped down from the cab and was stunned to see a young woman.

"My name's Gao Mei," said she, pulling off her canvas raincoat, which she had worn to keep out the wind. Wavy hair fell to her shoulders as she offered a soft, white hand. "Are you Xizi the team leader?"

Xizi put his hands into his pockets and countered, "Are you alone?"

"I've come to report for duty. I'm the medical orderly."

"Medical orderly?"

"Am I not welcome?"

"You are."

He kept his distance from her as he carried her luggage on his back, not casting another glance at her. She had brought a lot with her, a big bedroll, a big suitcase and several bags. The zipper of one bag had burst, revealing a large, round mirror and many cosmetics. As he saw his dishevelled hair in the mirror, he instinctively raised his hand to smooth it. A giggle made him ruffle it again, and he turned the mirror over. The back revealed a big coloured picture of her, smiling at him.

He said nothing.

The water-tanker headed for the residential area, while he took her by a shortcut to the team, which was quartered on level ground.

"How long have you been at the oil field?" he asked.

"Five years."

"You'll be twenty-six, then?"

"Do I look that old?"

"....."

"I'm twenty-three."

"You've been working at headquarters?"

"Right."

"They sent you here?"

"I volunteered."

"Our team has never had a girl before."

"I know."

"And it's windy here."

"I can see that. You're tanned."

"Are you a graduate from the Petroleum Technical School?"

"I replaced my father."

"On his retirement?"

"On his death."

Xizi turned around. Her long hair, blown up by the wind, covered half her fair-complexioned face. He knew that many men had been replaced like that. He felt bad that she should have to replace her father at such a tender age.

"The residential area is up there?" she asked. "Where's the well?"

"There, on the other side of the gully. See?"

On a hillock stood a tall derrick and a few men no bigger than beans. The sound of an engine carried over.

"You don't have much artemisia here."

"All we have is petrol and wine."

"I can see what you do from your clothes, and I can smell what you've been drinking from your breath."

Hearing the voice of the driver and the noise of the water-tanker driving towards the residential area, all the workers came out to meet her. Unwashed from work, their clothes caked with mud, they stared at her. The whites of their eyes were very conspicuous in their greasy faces.

She almost cried out.

Feeling ashamed suddenly, Xizi snapped at the men, "Go back to your rooms and take a look at yourselves in the mirror. You can't meet people like that. You look like bandits."

They dispersed instantly.

Xizi took Gao Mei to his topsy-turvy room. His bed was unmade, his clothes and socks piled beside his pillow. A dusty desk was covered with wine bottles, bowls and plates. Unable to find a place to sit in when asked to sit down, she finally perched on the edge of the bed, while the embarrassed Xizi leaned against the desk and said:

"We're all men, you know."

"Men are untidy," came the answer.

He laughed as he searched his pockets for a cigarette but found only some shreds of tobacco. He lifted his quilt and shook it. A packet of cigarettes fell out.

He lit one, then, realizing something, he quickly opened the door

and the little window, and a stack of forms hanging on the wall was blown to the floor.

Gao retrieved the pages and glanced outside. Mobile houses looking like railway cars stood all around. At the door of every room stood men who had changed into yellow army uniform, looking in her direction. She burst out laughing.

"What're you laughing at?" Xizi asked.

"Don't you think it's a bit windy?"

"I like it this way."

"You're smart, but I'm not a soft sort either."

This made him even more embarrassed. He went to the door and shouted, "Come over here. Is that the way to behave when a new comrade arrives? What've you got to hide?"

They all came to the door with honest, smiling faces. Someone at the back pushed one in front, who tumbled in. Then they all squeezed in. Xizi introduced her as Gao Mei. "That's a pretty name," said many. When told that she was a medical orderly, they said she did look like one and clapped their hands in welcome. Her face flushed, Gao didn't know where to put her arms and legs. She said, "I've never been to an oil team and know nothing about it." They said, "We'll be one big family from now on." Gao added, "I hope you'll tell me if I do anything wrong." They all laughed and said that was no problem. When Gao offered them sweets, no one accepted, so Xizi said, "No false modesty here," and tossed the sweets out, saying, "Go and eat them outside." The men rushed out and fought over them.

Xizi suddenly asked, "Is everybody here?"

A man in a Western suit answered, "I didn't let Lu Ping come."

"Is he ill?" Gao inquired.

"No, unpresentable," he smiled back unctuously.

"How embarrassing," Xizi grumbled.

3

That afternoon, people were hard put to find a place for Gao Mei to stay.

There was not a single peasant household on this ridge. The mobile houses, which had seventy rooms, made up an independent world which had on one side a precipice, on the other three deep gullies. The houses to the north were used as a kitchen. Every five days the water-tanker came to fill the big cement cistern outside it. Where should they accomodate Gao? They discussed for a long time before they reached an agreement to put her in the centre of the yard.

That evening, Gao began to fix up her home. She scrubbed every board in the room, made her bed, which had a woollen mattress, a blanket and snow-white linen, and decorated the walls with pictures. She ran a wire across the room and hung her clothes up. On the little table, which was covered with a cloth, she placed a tape recorder and her mirror displaying the picture of her beautiful, charming face.

"It's wonderful." Western Suit had been helping her. He looked at the picture and swallowed hard.

"You think so?"

"It's so nice that you've come. The men are rolling in money, but all they care about are their stomachs, never their looks."

"But you're smart."

"What d'you think of my suit?"

"Very refined."

"You've good taste. But they laugh at me, get their dirty hands all over it whenever I put it on."

"What's your name?"

"Qiqi."

"Qiqi?" she repeated.

"Now don't you laugh."

"It's a woman's name."

"I call myself that on purpose. No matter how careful you are you gradually turn sloppy in this place."

She laughed again.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No."

"If there is, just tell me."

"Right. Why didn't you let that man come?"

"Which man?"

"The one the team leader called embarrassing."

"You mean Lu Ping? He's a depressing fellow. He wallows in money, but he has no good clothes. And he never washes the few clothes he has, just stuffs his dirty ones under his bed and pulls out another one to wear. He is never asked to meet outsiders."

"You must be the smartest character here."

A whistle sounded. Xizi was summoning a meeting.

"What kind of a meeting?" she asked Qiqi.

"Concerning your arrival."

Qiqi smoothed his hair and made for the door, where he turned and said, "See you later."

He looked familiar, although she was sure that she had never seen him before. In the last few years she had seen a lot of young men

like him. Were they to be found everywhere? And there had to be one like him here too. Watching him bending down several times to flick dust off his trousers as he walked away, she noticed that the suit was ill-fitting, yet she couldn't tell what was wrong with it.

She sat down, still full of excitement. She put her hands to her chest as if to stop a bubbling fountain. The night was dark, and the stars seemed to be brighter than on the plain and the moon bigger too. But the gully grew misty and the wind kept blowing. Doors were opening and closing as workers drifted over to a room beside the kitchen. A few were laughing and perhaps fighting over a cigarette.

"Am I to live here from now on?" she asked herself. How would these men who saw no woman all the year round treat her?

She recalled a musk-deer she had seen when she went hunting with her grandfather in her childhood. They had chased happily after it, hoping to catch the pretty, fragrant creature.

She heard Xizi saying, "We've got a girl here now. She's the only female in this place. We must look after her and treat her kindly and with respect so that she'll not feel isolated. No one is to bully her. And keep in mind the seventh point of army standing orders: Do not take liberties with women. I'll be tough on anyone who violates it."

Gao couldn't help laughing.

The deer had sprinted up the mountain. When Grandpa suddenly halted, she had asked, "Why did you stop?"

"It's too beautiful."

"Then why is it still running?"

"It's carried away by its own beauty and fragrance."

She made for the meeting room but stopped at the door and tiptoed back. First she gazed at her own picture and then softly hummed a song.

The meeting lasted till late. When the others returned to their rooms Qiqi dropped in again. "Haven't gone to bed yet?"

"I'm not sleepy."

"You ought to go to bed early."

He left. But he returned again to tell her, "You can get hot water in the kitchen."

"I know."

"We don't have a bath here. You can use my big basin if you like."

"No. Thanks."

"Good night."

He was gone. The yard became quiet, and the lights went out one by one. Sitting at the table, Gao felt as if a duster were brushing her

neck. She turned and found that a draught was coming through a small hole in the wall. She pasted it up. Still she was not sleepy. The wind seemed to have grown in strength. She went out to the yard and heard the men snoring. The deep, dark night had a strong masculine scent. She walked to the edge of the levelled ground and saw the lights on the derrick.

In the moonlight she looked at her watch. It was half past one. Suddenly she heard a noise in the shade outside a house.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

The noise stopped abruptly, and a shadow darted into a room. From the light in the room she could make out a naked body. Immediately she realized what he had been doing.

She blushed.

4

The following morning the sun shone brightly on the yard as the men squatted on their heels eating breakfast from huge enamel bowls bigger than their heads. Something had amused them, for they were pointing at each other with their chopsticks, convulsed with laughter.

The sun shone warmly on Gao as she combed her hair by the window. Qiqi, whose room was diagonally opposite hers, had just got out of bed. He kept stealing glances in her direction as he polished his leather shoes with a rag at his door.

"Qiqi, are you going into town?" someone called to him.

"Aren't we on shift at twelve?" he countered.

"Then what're you polishing your shoes for?"

"All you know is how to stuff your stomachs."

"We eat for ourselves. You dress up for other people."

Another chorus of laughter broke out.

When Gao went to get her food, all the men rose and smiled at her. When she squatted down to eat with them, they all clammed up, silently shovelling the food into their mouths with their heads lowered.

"What've you been talking about? Will you tell me the joke?"

They laughed, all eyes turned to one man, who flushed to the neck, rose and went away, hiding his face in his bowl. In parting he said, "I wasn't the only one, was I?"

Another gale of laughter erupted.

Gao laughed with them.

"D'you like our food?" someone asked.

"It's quite good."

"We've no tables."

"I like it this way."

"We're all rough people."

"I'm not that refined myself."

A shaft of white light glinted from a room to the south. Catching sight of it, someone called out, "Lu Ping's peering in his mirror."

The white light glinted and disappeared.

More joking followed. "He's curious, but he's timid."

"Is Gao a tigress?"

"You're sure you're not hungry, Lu Ping?"

So Lu lives in that corner, thought Gao. She went over. Lu's floor was so littered with all sorts of things that she could hardly find a foothold. He looked at her. The dried mud on his creased clothes cracked like fish scales. He had a beard and a strong jaw. Even his neck was covered with fine hair.

Lu had wanted to meet her and see if she would speak to him, but Qiqi had mocked him, telling him to spruce up. That had put him off and made him stay away. When Gao was eating outside he had been too shy to meet her or even pass her to get food, so he had stayed in his room trying to get a look at her in his mirror. Being discovered embarrassed him even more. Gao's entry made him keenly aware of his own sloppiness. It was too late to close the door on her, and he couldn't find a hiding place either.

"Lu Ping!" she called. There was not a hint of mockery in her voice.

He gave no answer.

"Why didn't you eat?"

Her voice melted his heart.

He remained silent.

"Don't you like me coming to your room?"

Lu wanted to run away, but his legs suddenly went weak and he leaned against a table.

Qiqi called Gao out and said to Lu, "Have you been scaring her?" Lu slammed the door.

At noon that day, on their way to work, Lu, the strongest man in the team, threw himself at Qiqi like a raging lion and knocked him down. Qiqi shouted that he would get his own back but didn't hit back when they were parted, though he kept on swearing.

Lu's action baffled everyone. Even Qiqi was bewildered by his wrath. Xizi gave him a piece of his mind, although he didn't know what he was talking about himself. Everyone felt that Lu was becoming increasingly eccentric and difficult to understand.

Gao learned about the incident many days later when Xizi had puzzled her by telling her, "You've done wonders, Gao. You know what everybody's talking about these days?"

She jumped with fright.

"Without a woman here, the men got lazy and pissed outside the door in the night. They were ashamed of what happened the other night, and no one's going to do that again. I'd warned them many times before, but what I said carried no weight. Your arrival has changed all that."

It suddenly dawned on her what people had been laughing about that morning.

Then he told her Lu Ping had punched Qiqi.

"They think he did it because Qiqi called you away from his room."

Gao stopped dead. "Because of me?"

5

Gao mixed well with everybody. Apart from her own duty, she did many other things too. Every morning she swept the yard. So the men shovelled away the garbage piles and mud mounds, and Xizi made them build a basket-ball field, where they played and shot the ball jubilantly. The game livened up the sixty-four men. Gao, the only spectator, loved to run after the ball when it bounced out of bounds. Running after the bouncing ball, she skipped merrily too.

On sunny days, the men had always taken off their jackets to search for lice. No one dared to do that now. Lines were put up in the yard, and they began to do their laundry.

After Gao bought a pair of hair-clippers, no men's hair was allowed to grow below his ears.

Has the difference between the sexes played a part in human progress? Gao pondered over this many times, realizing suddenly her own value.

She understood that all men loved beauty, and by strengthening it with dignity, noble-mindedness and friendliness towards her teammates, she could call forth more beauty in them and drive away wicked ideas.

When Xizi praised her, she only smiled and said, "I'm a woman."

"I've learned a lot from you. I owe you a lot."

"Such as what?"

"These men are wild and not to be convinced by preaching. A team leader is no use. A team is like a family. It needs a housewife."

Realizing that his tongue had slipped, he flushed scarlet.

She smiled understandingly. These lovable men had made her realize that she was a woman.

Her room had become the team's centre. The men came to her, ill or not, all of them. At first they would pretend that they were ill. The minute they came in, they would complain of a headache or a fever and sit down to chat and joke, and when they were done they would take off without mentioning their sickness. Neither did she bother to ask. They came when they were not ill, and when they did get ill they became very spoilt and trembled at the needle. She had to scold them, and that suddenly made them very brave.

"Men need encouragement and support."

Gao noticed that her visitors often stole glances at themselves in her mirror and told herself, "Men care about their looks, then, perhaps more than women."

She paid visits too. Any room she set foot in usually stayed tidy afterwards, for the owner looked upon her visit as an honour. Everyone began to care about cleanliness.

Lu Ping was still the dejected one in the team and never came near her room, even when he fell ill. While others chatted and made merry in her room, he would lie on his bed smoking and drinking. She had to clean up for him when he got drunk one day.

"You mustn't drink so much," she told him.

"I have to."

"But you should know when to stop."

"What do I care? It's my only friend."

"Don't despair. Look at me."

"You and I are different."

"How?"

"From the minute you came, you've been surrounded by people. Nobody thinks anything of me. Who'd come to see me?"

"I would."

Gao took to dropping in on Lu whenever she had the time, and Lu started to care about his appearance too.

Xizi joked to her, "The sloppiness seems to have been my fault, Gao. Don't you come to my place if I don't clean it up."

"All the more reason. I want to check up on the team leader."

Lu perked up and became confident since Gao didn't despise him. He began to mix with people, although he didn't talk as much as Qiqi. Whenever Gao showed up and the others went over to talk

to her, he would stay behind and look at her but avoid her eyes when she looked up.

He began to take an interest in things. Many times he intended to visit her and drew back at the door when he saw her room filled with people. And when he found her alone, he became so nervous that he sweated and hated himself for his cowardice.

He felt a certain joy as well as something like panic. One day after work, he even gathered a bunch of artemisia for Gao.

"Ah, you like flowers?" she said.

"Aren't they pretty?"

"How did you know I liked them?"

"All women do."

"My, I'd never have expected you to be so observant!"

Shyly, he leaned against the door.

"Come in!"

"Are you busy?"

"Why've you been avoiding me?"

"I haven't."

"I can see that you have something on your mind."

"No, nothing."

"Sure?"

"I just get flustered, I don't know why."

"How do you mean?"

"I can't really say."

He blushed and took to his heels.

Carefully Gao put the flowers in a vase and changed the water three times a day.

The next day, Qiqi brought her some flowers too. Then everyone brought flowers every day. When she proposed that they build a flower bed, they all pitched in and planted a bed of artemisia in the yard and around the edge of the levelled ground on their rest days. The yellow, red and white flowers grew well and could be seen from down the hill and from the oil well too.

Gao named their living quarters Artemisia Village. Headquarters was pleased and recommended them to the entire oil field. Xizi was overjoyed and told Gao, "I read a book once, Gao, that said a carpenter acts on wood and a bricklayer on mortar. You must act on beauty. That's your contribution. You take care not only of our health but of our minds too."

Gao pooh-poohed this. "You're getting a bit poetic, aren't you, team leader?"

With things improving, life was still monotonous, as there were no movies or shows and the mobile projection team's visits were few and far between. Qiqi played the harmonica sometimes. The others played ball, cards, or chin-wagged or played finger games while they drank, getting someone pickled each time. Though the team leader often bought wine for everybody, he never got plastered himself. Gao asked him, "Why d'you treat them to wine, team leader?"

"We've money but no fun. I try to bring everyone together to have some fun."

"But they get wild when they've had a drop too much. It won't be much fun if this goes on."

"I know. That's why I make them stick to their study hours."

Gao laughed. "That was just what I wanted to bring up with you. Do we have to keep it up like that?"

"Certainly, otherwise they'd get into mischief with time on their hands. I must tie them down."

"But men can't be tied down like buckets."

Xizi looked helpless. "D'you have any ideas?"

"You can't read newspapers to them all the time in the study hours. They just chat and snooze while you read. Why don't we furnish a common room and get some books and newspapers and let them read what they like? They might like that better."

Xizi pondered a while. "OK. Will you take care of that?"

Soon the common room was set up, and Xizi contributed a large sum of money. Others made contributions too. Gao bought books and games, subscribed to several newspapers from town and installed her own tape recorder in the common room. Though the team leader hadn't officially put her in charge, everyone looked upon her as the head.

While they occasionally drank, they invited Gao over. She didn't touch a drop and guarded the bottle, not allowing anyone too much. Later she made them pass a flower around. Whoever had the flower in his hand when a whistle stopped had to sing a song, recite a poem, or down a cup of wine as a punishment if he couldn't do anything. This increased the men's interest in singing and their life became fuller.

Gao's prestige increased, and she became an indispensable member of the team. Whenever she went down the hill to get medical supplies, some of the men would go long distances to meet her.

Soon a natural thing happened.

One day, Gao didn't return, although darkness had begun to fall.

Everyone was worried. Qiqi rounded up half a dozen men and went to meet her. Lu rounded up another group. The two groups met at the foot of the pass, where they waited for her and talked about her. Everything was a compliment. Someone claimed that whoever married her would be the happiest man on earth. Lu found this music to his ears, although he remained silent, not daring to say anything in the same strain in public. Qiqi piped up, "Who d'you think she likes best on the team?"

"Everybody," someone said.

"But best?"

"You, maybe? Gao is neat. So are you," someone said to Qiqi.

"That's true," he answered.

Lu couldn't maintain his silence anymore. "They are neat in different ways."

Qiqi demanded, "What are you driving at?"

"You know what I mean."

"Let me tell you something, although you don't say much and blush when she's around, I know what's on your mind."

"That's fine with me."

"Don't you get any ideas, I'm telling you."

"And don't you either."

"Piss in your own pot!"

"Wash your mouth out!"

All the men fell silent, weighing secretly in their hearts whether they had had ideas of their own. Finally Qiqi and Lu came to blows, clutching each other's collars. The men cried, "Stop that. Gao wouldn't like it."

Both let go of the other. But they kept apart from then on.

Those who had ideas began to weigh their own eligibility and looked upon everyone as a rival. They stopped eating and drinking together.

They again squandered their money on sweets, cigarettes and wine, while all tried to win her heart by dropping in for a chat or helping her with chores in groups or by turns, fetching water when she washed clothes or emptying the dustbins when she swept the yard. They wanted her to do things for them too. The person whose clothes she mended would be as proud as a rooster and become the envy of everybody. Secretly they vied to win her heart.

Still in the dark about all this, Gao was shocked when she received the first love letter.

She admitted that a woman wanted to be loved.

What about men?

Within a month, all the bachelors, except Lu, had written to her.

Not knowing what to do, she confided in Xizi, seeking his opinion. But she didn't tell him she had received more than one letter, and she refused to disclose the sender and made him promise to keep it a secret.

"Well, it depends on how you feel," he said.

"Me?"

"Yes. He loves you. If you love him too, no one should interfere. We'll wish you happiness."

"Suppose I'd received many letters?"

Xizi was stunned. "Then, choose the one you like."

She shook her head.

"None of them is good enough?"

"That's not it. I don't want to break up this collective and the good comradeship. I'm still young. I want to wait a few more years."

When Xizi told the men Gao's decision, the suiters received a heavy blow, and no one sang. Instead they sulked in their rooms. Things only became normal again two days later. Qiqi went to Lu's room to make up with him. Then all those who had sent her love letters came with a bottle of wine and drank. But they remained relatively sober and told one another calmly, "She's not going to fall in love with any of us, but she'll be nice to all of us. It's all for the best. If she belonged to one of us, we couldn't be so friendly with her anymore."

Then they went to see and talk to Gao, as if to ease her mind.

Feeling guilty, Gao broke her rules by buying a bottle of wine and drinking with them.

The team was peaceful. Lu was no longer shy and flustered. He would put on his army trousers and drop in on her unself-consciously. Qiqi, just as neat, didn't wear his Western suit quite so often or shine his leather shoes every morning opposite Gao's door. The men stuck together. Gao was pleased and tried to do more for them. She scolded Qiqi for squandering his money while his parents were so hard up. Qiqi asked Gao to keep his wages for him and keep an eye on his spending. Then all those who couldn't manage their finances entrusted their money to Gao, who became a sort of a banker.

7

Another thing preyed on Gao's mind, for she was concerned about the men's marriages. They were strong young men doing hard work. It was high time that they should get married. City girls had no eye for

them, while girls on the oil field would rather marry outside their trade. If this went on they couldn't work well for long.

Asceticism distorts a man.

When she brought this up with Xizi he grasped her hand for the first time. If she could do something about this headache of his he would thank her on behalf of all the bachelors.

She began her investigation. Which of the single men could find someone in their home town? Did they have their eye on anyone? She kept a file of everyone in her mind. And when they found a girlfriend they would confide in her to know what she thought. She arranged for girlfriends from the men's home towns to visit the team and took care of them like sisters when they came.

She was worn out by care and busy medical work, becoming thinner and thinner, and her period became irregular. Lu asked her solicitously, "Are you ill?"

"Nonsense."

"You look washed out. You must be ill. What is it?"

"Don't be nosy."

"I want to know."

"You're a fool." She laughed and walked away.

Xizi boxed his ears playfully when Lu told him about it. "You are a fool," he said. "Maybe it's a woman's problem."

It was then decided that she must be made to rest when she was unwell, and no one should stay too late in her room. Her supplies of grain and vegetables must be guaranteed when there was a shortage. Also, while the whole team had a ration of hot water, she could use as much as she needed.

One day, the water-tanker came when she felt weak and was sleeping in her room. The driver knocked at her door, telling her that he had found two girls in the logistics department for Lu and Qiqi. When she sought out the two men to tell them to go and meet them, both were very shy.

"Will she like me?" one said hesitantly.

"Go and find out. It's no big deal."

"We wouldn't know what to say. Why don't you go and have a look first?"

"I can't make decisions for you."

"If you like them, we certainly will."

She thought for a moment and went down the hill with the driver.

Both men could have kicked themselves when Xizi told them Gao was not well. They were also scolded by their mates. After work, a dozen men got a lift and went down to look for her.

Gao met the two girls. Regretfully, one girl showed reluctance to meet Qiqi, while the other refused to meet Lu at all when she had seen his picture and found out about his family from Gao, although Gao had done all she could to persuade her. Gao was so upset that she went immediately to look for a truck to get a lift back without stopping to eat. When some workers from another team saw her on the street, one of them said, "Isn't that the better half of Xizi's team?" Another said, "Yes, the village's sweetheart." As they broke into wanton laughter, Gao turned to glare at them.

"No wonder she takes care of the drilling team, a pretty little fox like that," someone commented. "She's a public bus."

"Behave yourselves," Gao scolded.

"A public bus with room for all!"

Gao trembled with rage. The men were even more pleased with themselves. It was just then that the men coming to look for her arrived. They had a heated dispute with the rascals and beat them up.

The incident was reported to headquarters. The rascals were reprimanded, but the men in Gao's team were criticized for having used their fists. Xizi called a meeting, at which Gao blamed herself. Once she did that, all the men rose and criticized themselves. In the end they decided to write a report to headquarters. Qiqi drafted it very stylishly.

The last paragraph read, "Gao Mei is a symbol of beauty and belongs to our team. Her beauty gives us hope, courage and strength. We want to cherish and protect such beauty."

The report was signed by Xizi and the sixty-three other men. To everybody's surprise, headquarters was touched, and everyone in the oil field got to know about it. The last paragraph was so popular that it was even copied into notebooks, bulletins and love letters.

8

Gao received many letters of consolation, books and even melon seeds. Leaders came from headquarters to see her. Artemisia Village became very prosperous, and production shot up.

June passed. In July the weather in the hills was extremely changeable. When the road collapsed in a storm, supplies and water couldn't be sent up, and the team ate only one meal a day. Many fell ill with malaria. Gao spent several days and nights bringing the disease under control. She worked at the well too, as they were short-handed with men out of action.

It was four kilometres from Artemisia Village to the well. On fine

days they were taken there by a vehicle over the hilltops. Now they had to go down a slope and then climb another slope. Going to work at night, they walked hand in hand and with the help of sticks. Every time someone was bound to slip, though nothing serious would happen to him. However, the man would be covered with mud. As Gao grew weaker every day, the men took turns to carry her on their backs. Gao was moved to tears. When July passed, everything became normal again. Production had not been affected in the slightest, but Gao collapsed and was taken to the headquarters hospital.

The team, feeling desolate without her, realized how much their life depended on her. As soon as they got off work, the first thing they did was to find out whether she had returned. Softly they went to her room, where they sat smoking silently, taking care to put the cigarette ash in a piece of paper and mop the table and sweep the floor before leaving, because the owner was a tidy person.

Lu and Qiqi visited her in the hospital every other day, adjusting their clothes before entering her ward, and reluctant to take leave of her.

Gao slowly recovered. She asked Qiqi if he was making any headway with his girlfriend and promised Lu to find a nice pretty girl for him.

Leaders from headquarters came too. She was particularly grateful to the chief of the personnel department, who came more often than the others and brought her many things. She used to sit up and talk to him. One day, he asked her, "Have you a boyfriend?"

"No," she blushed. "I'm too young. I'll wait a few more years."

"You're such a nice girl. Though work comes first, marriage is necessary too. We're very concerned about it."

She was very touched.

"We have a smart young driver at headquarters who is from a good family. I'll introduce him to you."

"No, no!" she cried uneasily.

"You could see each other sometimes. It's very hard in the team, especially for a girl. You can't stay there forever. If you married him we'd have you transferred to the logistics department."

Gao fell silent. She hadn't given much thought to marriage and her future. Though grateful for his concern, she had no intention of leaving the team where she had volunteered to go. There she had found her place and had come to understand men and how a girl could get along among a group of men.

"No," she repeated.

"Haven't you refused all the men in the team?"

It was a distortion and insult. She had loved the team too much to accept any one member's love. She hadn't refused them because she despised them.

"No. I want to stay there all my life."

Her head aching suddenly, she slipped down under the quilt and became oblivious to what he said next. Before he left he patted her and said, "You're a good girl. Give it some thought, will you?"

She appreciated his concern, struggled to sit up and said goodbye to him.

The next day a strange young man in a good suit and sunglasses came to see her and brought her fruit and cakes.

Dubiously, she asked, "You must be. . . ."

"I'm Qingqing, brother of Wang, chief of the personnel department. I'm a driver at headquarters."

She understood everything and felt repelled by the department chief.

"I don't know you or the chief of the personnel department. You've made a mistake."

"Aren't you Gao Mei?"

"No."

That afternoon when Lu and Qiqi came to see her, she clutched their hands and cried. The two knew nothing about what had happened, but she entreated them to take her home and wouldn't be persuaded to stay another day. They had to comply with her and returned to the team at a late hour.

The team had a feast to welcome her, and she showed her appreciation by singing many songs and downing three cups of wine. Xizi took her winecup away.

"What's the matter with you, Gao? You shouldn't drink so much after your illness."

"I'm so excited to be back."

She couldn't fool him. He went to see her after the meal.

"What's on your mind, Gao?"

"Nothing," she said, crouching on her quilt.

"Was anybody unkind to you in the hospital?"

"Don't ask questions." She began to weep.

When she told him what had happened, Xizi was hopping mad and swore. "Call himself a department chief, did he? We'll report him."

Gao stopped him. When the others learned about it, they were worried for her.

"What do you think he'll do? Gao asked. "Won't he find fault with me?"

"You'll remain with us. We'll protect you."

They got a big brown dog to guard Gao's door at night. Lu said, "He will bite that man's legs off if he dares to come here."

9

That winter, when the well to the right of Artemisia Village was finished, they went five kilometres to the left to drill another one. Qiqi got married at this time.

The wedding took place in the village with Gao in charge of things. She helped them to decorate a small room. Firecrackers banged, and Gao sang and danced at the wedding, which lasted until midnight.

Qiqi's wife, who worked at the oil field mechanical plant, gave the team two white pigeons she had raised herself.

A cage was built inside Gao's room. Lu often took the pigeons to the well and sent notes to Gao tied to their legs. As there was no phone at the well, the pigeons brought Gao notes from many workers with news from the well.

When Gao went out, the brown dog ran before her, while the pigeons stood on her shoulders. She looked like an angel to the men in the team. When wild flowers bloomed on the green hills in spring, Lu received a letter from his home in Shaanxi telling him that they had found a beautiful girl for him and wanted him to go home and meet her. When he showed Gao the letter she was so pleased that she urged him to go right away. His leave was soon granted by headquarters, and his team-mates gave him a send-off. Lu shook everyone's hand and told Gao, "Can I take them home?"

"Who?"

"The pigeons. It's so far from home that a letter takes a fortnight to reach here. I want you to know how we like each other as soon as possible."

"A good idea," everyone exclaimed. Gao kissed the pigeons and gave them to Lu.

Ten days later the pigeons returned with a long letter from Lu saying that he had met and liked the girl, who had eyes like Gao's. Things were going well between them. He wanted everybody to drink to him. Gao must drink too in the direction of the southeast and wish him luck.

Gao read the letter to the team. At noon she got wine, raised her cup to the southeast and shouted, "To your happiness, Lu Ping!"

"To your happiness, Lu Ping!" the hills echoed.

Eighty per cent of the bachelors had got married or had girlfriends

by then. Gao felt good for them and could sleep well at night, so well that she even missed work one morning.

She filled out, sang more and learned to play the harmonica from Qiqi, soon surpassing him.

Lu returned a month later with many local specialties from home. He gave everyone a packet of fried silkworm chrysalises and beans and Gao a long letter and a handkerchief embroidered with narcissi.

The letter was from Lu's girlfriend, expressing her gratitude to Gao for being kind to Lu. She would be forever grateful to her and hoped that Gao would find a sweetheart too.

Gao asked with a smile, "What about this handkerchief?"

"It's a present from her."

"How can you give it to me then?"

"Why not? If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have been able to make her like me."

"You're not supposed to give her souvenirs away, you fool."

"Will you keep it for me then?"

She folded it up carefully and stored it away in her chest.

A month later, drilling on the derrick, Lu pulled away some connecting parts by accident, making the derrick wobble, and some big nuts fell on his head. The first one knocked off his safety helmet, the second landed on his skull. He bled profusely and fainted.

Gao was brewing medicine for a patient when she read the note brought back by the pigeon. Turning pale, she hurried to the derrick with her medical kit. She bandaged the unconscious Lu, calling him softly. Slowly he came to.

"Gao Mei," he said weakly.

Gao bent down and took his hand.

"I'm dying. I'm glad to see you before I go," he said slowly and fixed his eyes on her, pulling her hand near and clutching it with all his might.

"Don't say such things, Lu. You'll get well. We'll take you to the hospital right away."

"I know I'm dying," said Lu with a faint smile. "I want to say something to you before it's too late."

"Speak up, Lu."

"I loved you deeply, ever so deeply, before I met the girl."

Tears welled up in Gao's eyes. She said, "I know, Lu."

Lu's grip relaxed, and he lost consciousness again.

His team-mates cried. Gao had him put into a truck to go to hospital. On the way, Lu regained consciousness and called Gao.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Do you have the harmonica with you?"

"Yes." She took it out from her pocket.

"Please play something. I like to hear you play."

The tearful Gao played as the truck bounced along the road. The melody was so beautiful that she surprised those in the truck and herself too. The strains of the melody carried far far away, while the two white pigeons flew in the front of the truck and the brown dog chased behind in the dust.

When Gao stopped and looked down at Lu, he was dead.

10

Gao didn't show her grief in public over Lu's death. Alone, she would cry into the handkerchief embroidered with narcissi.

She would stare at the two pigeons flying in the sky until they disappeared like two dots, then listlessly drop her head.

The men felt sorry for her. Xizi tried to console her. "You must take care of yourself, Gao."

"I'm all right," she said.

"We're feeling very bad over Lu. Don't break our hearts even more by falling ill."

"I know."

She nodded as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Xizi consulted his men about what they could do for Gao, who had done so much for everyone in the team. They tried many things.

When autumn arrived, the artemisia blossomed again, and the team was happy that Gao was in a better mood. After work every day, they tended the flowers and watered them with water saved from their supply. The artemisia was taller than a man, attracting many bees and butterflies.

But it reminded Gao of Lu.

She produced the vase which had held the first artemisia Lu had picked for her and placed the handkerchief on top of it.

The brown dog still kept watch outside her door at night. In the daytime it patrolled around the flowers, barking at strangers who dared to come near.

When the terrible rainy season arrived, the hill torrents cut the road and the vegetable supply. For three days the team ate nothing but rice and sugar. Three men fell ill when the whole team went down to bring up rice and vegetables on their backs and were caught in the rain. With Gao's care, two went back to work four days later, while

the third still ran a high fever. Gao took him down to the hospital in a truck.

The road was in bad shape. They made only twenty kilometres in two hours and were still moving with difficulty in the hills. Gao held the man in her arms to save him from too much bumping in the back of the truck.

The sodden road was hazardous. The truck skidded at a turning. As the driver braked hard, both Gao and the patient jumped. Gao quickly tried to grip the patient again, but before she could steady herself, she was thrown out when the truck started suddenly.

The driver stopped when the patient panicked. There was no sign of Gao. Finally he found her lying peacefully in a gully.

That was the day the team finished the new well ahead of time. They were shouting with excitement when the news arrived. All broke down.

Everyone was overcome with grief, not expecting her to die so early and so suddenly.

They dug a deep grave by the new well and planted artemisia on both sides of the path leading from their yard. They carried her coffin through a neat road of fragrant artemisia from the yard to the grave, as the pigeons stood on the coffin and the brown dog barked madly. The funeral procession was extremely sad.

II

A year later.

The team, which continued to live in Artemisia Village, had drilled more wells.

The all-male team missed their only woman team-mate. Yet they didn't revert to their old sloppiness.

Gao's room was still in the middle of the yard surrounded by mobile houses. Her bed was covered with snow-white linen. On the table was the vase covered with a handkerchief, while her beautiful picture stood on the chest of drawers.

The team members often went into her room to smoke silently, and took care to wrap the cigarette ash in paper. Before they left, they would straighten the bed, sweep the floor and wipe the table, for the owner had been a neat person.

Everyone would straighten their clothes and smooth their hair before entering, because they had come to see a sacred woman.

Three new girls came to the team when the artemisia bloomed in July. They were young and pretty as flowers and had come from the

Petroleum Technical School. They were starting a new life and went together to Gao's grave.

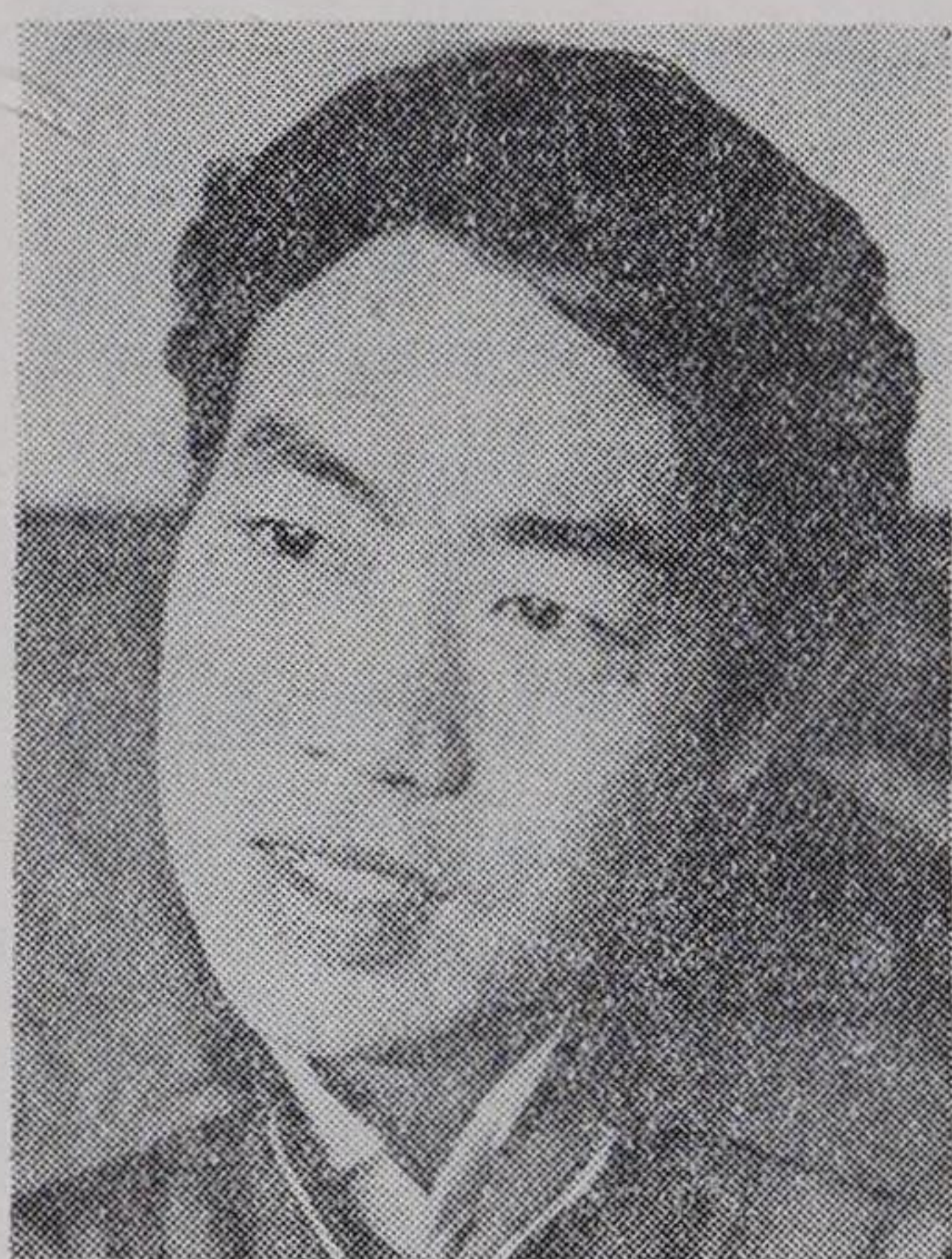
They followed the path lined with artemisia until they came to her grave, which faced the village. Behind was a pump which rumbled all day as if praying for the beautiful Gao.

The brown dog had come too and crouched silently at the grave while the white pigeons circled overhead.

One girl said, "It's lovely artemisia."

The other two girls chimed in, "Yes, lovely."

Translated by Yu Fanqin



About the Author

Jia Pingwa was born in 1953 in Danfeng County, Shaanxi Province, and graduated from the Chinese department of Northwestern University. Once an editor at the Shaanxi People's Publishing House, he is now a professional writer, vice-president of the Xi'an branch of the Writers' Association and a council member of the Chinese Writers' Association.

His writing career started in 1973. He has now 15 collections of short stories and essays. His "Two Sisters" (see Chinese Literature, No. 4, 1979) and "The Twelfth Month and the First Month" have won best national short story awards. "Artemisia" is taken from Shanghai Literature, No. 3, 1985.

Rain, Rain, Go Away

Sun Li

It rained.

In a corner of the small market, Moon quickly opened a nylon umbrella with an orchid design and took Snow White, the seven dwarfs, the long-haired Pekinese dog and the winking doll into her arms. She sat on a campstool, trying to draw in her legs as closely as possible so as to make room for more toys under the umbrella.

A small umbrella covered her and her fairy world.

The raindrops fell on the umbrella, came together, trickled down between the ribs and splashed around her. Moon gazed from under the umbrella at the bustling feet with their various sandals: red, white, brown, black, high-heeled, flat-soled, wedge-soled. They ran, the splashed water dirtying the waterproof toys on Moon's sales stall.

Last year, also on a rainy day, Moon, with her toys, came to this corner, opening an old oil-paper umbrella and spreading a piece of plastic on the ground to display her small fairy world.

The small market was noisy with the sound of crying, hawking, bargaining and different kinds of laughter. In order to grab better places and get more customers, people quarrelled time and again and even drew blood. Under the colourful clothes, which hung like flags of all nations, there were delight, sighs, complacency and depression.

Moon's only weapon to keep her stall was her tears.

A pair of big bare feet stopped beside the umbrella, the blue jeans rolled up to the knees exposing coarse, black hair on the legs. Their owner flicked her umbrella, and immediately a piece of chequered plastic covered Moon's stall. Then the big bare feet splashed off.

It was Old Black.

When she began trading, Moon could not keep from quaking at the sight of his vicious looks. Old Black, in his twenties, had broad shoulders, a purple scar descending from the corner of his left eye, a cigarette always stuck in his mouth, puffing smoke rings. On Moon's second day, he strolled over, swinging his shoulders, took up Snow White, looked at it with narrow eyes for a while, then asked, puffing out smoke at Moon, "For sale?"

"Yes. Oh no, not for sale."

Moon drew back in a fluster.

"Not for sale? Why not?" he asked, looking askance.

Moon stared at the big hand holding the thin neck of Snow White, feeling her throat tight and her heart throbbing. "I'm keeping it. To play with."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Old Black rocked with laughter. "To play with? How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Moon answered haltingly, tears dripping down quietly, her hand stretched out, quivering.

Old Black stopped laughing, puffed a mouthful of thick smoke upward, put down Snow White, snapped the fingers of his right hand, then left.

Old Black sold sundry goods. His store was set under the eaves, opposite Moon's stall. There was a bunch of them: the men all wore shoulder-length hair, while the women were even more curious. In April, when the winter chill still lingered, they put on skirts, very short ones, and everyone of them wore make-up, their eyes heavily underlined. Old Black was the boss, in charge of stock, handling of goods, pricing and taxes. A pale, tall woman with big eyes, called Eighth Sister, was his "partner".

At this moment, Eighth Sister shrieked from under the eaves across the street, "Come over here out of the wet, Old Black!"

It rained harder and harder, the water on the ground splashing into bubbles. The small market seemed to have hung up a transparent curtain.

Hearing Eighth Sister scream and laugh, Moon subconsciously drew her legs closer.

Nobody knew why Eighth Sister had been so hard on Moon ever since she had started up. "Hey, you skipping school again today, schoolgirl?" The quip set people laughing. Her laughter was high-pitched, complacent and somewhat jealous. Moon lowered her head, her smooth forehead showing a few lines which should not have been there yet, and the hazy blue veins stood out on her temples. Whenever things came to such a pass, Old Black would cut them off impa-

tiently by saying, "Enough of that. Don't make such damn fun of her."

"Oh, you sorry for her?" A set of giggles followed.

"You from Shanxi, Eighth Sister?" Scraggy Dog teased her. Scraggy Dog was the nickname of a short, thin man, one of the bunch.

After a moment of shock, everybody roared with laughter. Eighth Sister went for Scraggy Dog. "Are you saying I take vinegar?"*

Nobody noticed Moon, whose head was lowered and whose hands wrung her jacket. Only if the children, who were squatting before Moon's stall to see the toys, had lifted their heads, they would have seen Moon's eyes become red and tears well in them. Her licence hung on the wall behind her. In the photo her melancholy eyes were staring blankly at the riotous people on the other side of the street.

Never hawking her goods, Moon just spread a piece of plastic on the ground and on it laid the ceramic, plastic and cloth toys, cats, dogs, dolls, Santa Clauses and colourful balloons, all crowded together indiscriminately. She sat on a campstool and stared silently at the stream of people with melancholy eyes. Beside her stood the wooden Snow White and the seven dwarfs as big as a forefinger. Only when people stopped to ask their prices did she answer drily, as if it had nothing to do with her whether the toys were sold or not.

Time elapsed. There was always a crowd in front of Moon's stall. When people passed by they would stop, especially children, squatting down for a long time, reluctant to leave. Toys sold continuously. But the favourites were Snow White and the seven dwarfs. Whenever people asked for them, she would frown imperceptibly and say, "Not for sale." The answer was firm.

Gradually she realized that since she had set up her stall, some vulgar toys on Old Black's counters had disappeared and later some other pedlars had stopped selling toys, as if this business had become her patent. She racked her brains wondering why, but sensed that it was something to do with Old Black.

The sounds of crying, hawking, bargaining and quarrelling did not bother her. She was like a stone thrown into the noisy sea sinking down quietly to the bottom. Perhaps her stall was the only quiet place in the small market. Moon was satisfied. But one day her stall was shrouded with dark clouds.

In midsummer the noon sun blazed. Leaves drooped motionless

* "To take vinegar" is slang for "to be jealous"; the best vinegar comes from Shanxi.

on branches and the cement street was dazzling. The stink of sweat permeated the air. The whole market felt lazy.

Two punks, a tall one and a short one, stood in front of Moon's stall. The tall one wore a curl-rimmed straw hat down to his eyebrows, so that half of his dull, thin face was covered. The other one, short and fat, had a round face full of acne and played with a lighter, throwing it up and then catching it.

"How much is it, baby?" asked the tall one, pointing at Snow White.

"Not for sale," Moon answered timidly, glancing alertly about.

The fat punk squatted down, one hand tossing the lighter, the other digging his acne, saying, "Hèy, seen this, baby? It's gold. D'you want to swap?" He tossed the lighter to her, knocking over one of the dwarfs, and grabbed Snow White, smiling broadly straight at Moon.

Moon flushed, "No, I don't!"

"You don't, huh?" The tall punk impassively took Snow White from the fatty. "I suppose it's all right to look?"

The fat tough grinningly pointed at the toys one by one, asked their prices and picked them up to have a look. "What do you think of this one, buddy?"

The two tossed the toys between them. Moon looked at them in amazement. As the sun shone on his face, pretty soon the fat tough began to sweat all over his forehead, his long hair sticking to it like wool. At last, both had had enough fun and stood up to leave.

"Wait a moment," Moon called, picking up the lighter and handing it back. "I don't want to swap!"

The tall tough laughed, carelessly took the lighter, put Snow White into Moon's hand, which he deliberately squeezed, then turned to go.

Suddenly a big hand fell heavily on his shoulder. "Just a minute, buddy!" Old Black materialized behind him and spoke motionlessly, a cigarette cocked upward in his mouth, his eyes narrowing into a line, the purple scar on his face shining ferociously. He stretched out his left hand, palm upward, without a word.

"What do you want?" The tall tough tried to shrug off the hand, but Old Black grasped him so tightly that he could not move. The fat punk stepped in between. He was about to fight when he caught sight of Scraggy Dog standing by holding a stainless steel ruler like a chopper. The four of them gazed at each other as they stood impassively in the sunlight.

Moon was so scared that she shivered all over and stared nervously at them, her face pale. She had never in her life witnessed such a

scene, and she felt her heart pounding and her throat dry. "Don't! Don't!"

The air seemed to congeal.

Finally the fat hood lowered his head and stood aside, Scraggy Dog retreated two steps, while purposefully or purposelessly flicking the steel ruler so that it twanged.

The tall hood, avoiding Old Black's eyes, took some toys from his pocket: a ceramic dog, a Mickey Mouse and some uninflated balloons.

Old Black spat out what remained of the cigarette and then spat again ferociously and took his hand off the tall hood's shoulder to take the toys. Suddenly, with a swift move of his shoulder and a muffled thump, the tall hood fell to the ground. The fist had hit him right in the face, and the straw hat flew upward. A small plastic bag rolled out of it. Coins scattered on the ground, dancing and jingling. It was Moon's purse.

The tall hood got up and ran away. The fat tough followed.

Moon's legs went weak, and she sat on the campstool, tears falling ceaselessly. Eighth Sister walked up swaying her hips, the untied straps of her high-heeled sandals trailing behind like rat tails. She gave Scraggy Dog's rump a resounding slap. "Get into the shade!" She then gathered the coins on the ground with her foot and stood in front of Moon, arms akimbo, her high bosom thrown out, shrilling, "Stop crying, you mouse. Pick them up! Nothing's lost, what's there to cry for?"

Moon nodded gratefully, wiped away her tears and picked up the money.

"Be tough with the likes of them," she said and left, swaying her hips.

That whole summer, Moon nursed gratitude in her heart and smiled at Old Black's crowd time and again. This bright smile had not appeared on Moon's face for quite a long time. In response to it, Scraggy Dog would grin and chatter, while Eighth Sister pretended not to approve, shrugging her shoulders and toying with her gold necklace, beaming and buoyant. The gold chain had appeared on her neck recently. It was specially alluring, as the bright chain on her pale neck shone against her chest revealed by her low neckband. As for Old Black, he seemed indifferent to Moon's smile, but often stared at her blankly, elusively. Despite all this, Moon was willing to smile at them.

Summer passed and autumn came. After a strong west wind had swept through for a few nights, the ground was covered with leaves. It was getting cold.

Moon had planned to pack up her stall as soon as it was cold, but she felt inexplicably reluctant. As it got colder and colder, Old Black's crowd put on leather jackets, calling themselves the "leather bunch". Eighth Sister looked even more alluring in a tight-waisted red jacket. For some days they had been huddling together talking in whispers, and it looked odd. Nobody knew what was on. Several times Moon wanted to ask but did not put any question.

One afternoon, as Moon was about to wind up her day's trading, she saw some tax collectors and policemen standing in front of Old Black's store, a collector pressing Old Black with questions one after the other as if asking him to hand something over, while he explained with gestures. Eighth Sister, Scraggy Dog and the bunch stood around and watched as if nothing concerned them. In the twinkling of an eye, Scraggy Dog disappeared but before long reappeared in the crowd. Moon watched, unable to make head or tail of it. After quite some time the tax collectors and policemen left but kept turning their heads and talking. A faint, triumphant smile appeared in the corner of Old Black's mouth. He nodded lazily, his right hand holding a cigarette and the other on his hip.

Even now Moon did not know what was up, but as soon as she lowered her head, she found a bulging black hand-bag beside her. She was taken aback. When she raised her head with a puzzled look, she saw Old Black, Eighth Sister and Scraggy Dog coming up laughing.

Scraggy Dog stuck up his thumb and said, "That's the way! That's a friend for you!"

Moon took a look around, then realized that he was speaking to her. Still perplexed, she looked at them blinking.

Eighth Sister strode out ahead, handed over a box as big as a shoe box and pouted her painted lips. "Have a look."

Old Black puffed smoke, both hands on his own shoulders, beating time with one foot while he hummed tunelessly

The box was opened, another box tied with a red ribbon inside it. This one in turn revealed a boxful of luminous jewelry in aluminium: earrings, necklaces, bracelets and rings.

Moon was dumbstruck.

"Sell these," Old Black suggested in a low, muffled voice.

"Yes, there's an enormous profit on this stuff. It's terrific," said Eighth Sister, taking up the thread. "You can't make much on your toys. Sell these. They're a popular line."

Head lowered, Moon studied the jewelry in the box piece by piece, not saying a word.

"The source is foolproof. We'll take care of that without any problem." Scraggy Dog patted his chest and then stepped forward to get the black bag beside Moon.

"No!" Moon handed over the box without casting a look at them.

"It's a present from us to you. For your help just now. It would have been dangerous if they had found the bag. Take these small things as our repayment, OK?"

Moon slowly shook her head. "No, I won't sell them."

"No?" Eighth Sister cried.

Moon lowered her head. "I only sell toys, honestly!"

"But the profit!"

"No!" Moon raised her head, her bright eyes staring at Old Black's face. "I won't ask what's in the bag, but don't do it again. And take this box back. You can't just. . . ." She didn't finish the sentence, but gently taking out the ribbon and putting the box into Old Black's hands, she continued tidying up her own goods.

A few days later, Eighth Sister shouted in a piercing voice, "You call yourself a tough guy! You've gone soft. One word from that girl and you're scared. The hell with you, you wouldn't listen to me when I tried to tell you. How come it's OK now? What is she to you? Why do you do what she says?"

"All right, all right. If Old Black says we won't do it, just leave it." Scraggy Dog tried to mollify her.

"Don't you damned well try to put one over on me, you bastard. You're no better than he is. Stand aside. Speak up, what's between you and her?"

"That's enough. Stop kicking up a fuss!" Old Black said in a low voice.

"Enough? No way! You tell me today or you won't have heard the last of it! Don't think I don't know you've had your eye on her for some time, mate. Well, are you going to tell me, or do I have to go and smash her stall?"

"Look. . . . All right, you're too much for me today. She's my sister."

"Sister, shit! How come you have a sister? Don't play tricks on me." Swear words poured like water from her mouth. Unbuttoning her leather jacket, arms akimbo, she cursed, the thick powder on her face washed away by her tears.

"I have!" Old Black growled, but lowered his voice at once. "I have. She was given to another family when she was young. It's true, so help me!" So saying, Old Black squatted down, holding his head in both hands.

Moon raised her head in surprise and saw Eighth Sister standing still, gazing at Old Black with wide eyes, her expression changing rapidly: indignation, surprise, puzzlement, contemplation, regret.

Eighth Sister went up to Old Black till she was touching his head with her thighs, and ruffled his hair. "Are you really angry with me, Old Black?" The voice was gentle, honeyed and somewhat coquettish. Suddenly, she shrilled, "Come here, Moon!"

Moon went hesitantly. Eighth Sister snatched the gold necklace from her neck. "Here you are. A present from your sister-in-law — to-be!"

Shaking her head, Moon refused the necklace but stupidly asked Old Black, "Your sister? You mean me?"

Old Black shook his head.

"Why didn't you look for her?" asked Eighth Sister.

Old Black shook his head again, "I'd never find her. It's been a long time. I don't know where she is. She is your age." He nodded at Moon. "Seventeen!"

... It was still raining.

Wind started to blow, sending the fine drops under the umbrella. The cold drops drenched Moon all over, but she sat tight, holding the umbrella. Thunder kept crashing and rumbling. The dull sky seemed to brighten.

On the other side of the street, Eighth Sister and Scraggy Dog called at the top of their voices, "Come here quick, Moon!" But Moon held the umbrella with one hand and waved back to them with the other. When they kept calling, she took out the red ribbon from her pocket and waved it. "No, the rain will stop soon...."

Moon had been trading for a year already. Her fairy world attained such variety that her small stall was not big enough. She planned to ask somebody to make a half-metre high counter for her and have a glass cover fixed on it like a bright crystal box where she would stock more toys, and she even set her mind on ordering a few sets of Snow White and the seven dwarfs. Maybe she should move her stall or line up with Old Black's crowd.... She thought and smiled, and two deep dimples appeared on her chubby face.

The day before, as Moon was spreading the plastic cloth and taking the toys from her bag one by one, Old Black and Eighth Sister had come over. Since the incident they had become closer, and the last winter Moon had not stopped trading. Come snow or wind, no matter how cold it was, Moon started punctually. Eighth Sister had asked her to line up with them but she had smiled and refused. They often enquired after her across the street and the current of crowded people.

"Eaten yet?"

"Yes, thanks."

"That hoodlum make any trouble?"

"No, it's OK!" From then on smiles appeared frequently on Moon's face.

Old Black and Eighth Sister stood in front of the stall, holding out a blue jean skirt, "Put it on and see how it fits you, Moon."

"No, I couldn't wear that."

"Oh, don't put on airs! Look, it's genuine Hongkong." Eighth Sister was a bit irritated.

"No, I'm not used to it."

"All right, all right. Just take it!" Old Black, also somewhat unhappy, tossed the skirt down and left.

"No, don't go!" Moon's call stopped them. "How much?"

Old Black and Eighth Sister got annoyed right away. "Just what do you take us for?"

At that moment, out of the crowd came a tall, strong man over forty, wearing a trim police uniform, a wide-brimmed cap and red shoulder loops. He stood behind Old Black, right hand on his shoulder. "Bullying someone again, Old Black?" The voice was powerful. Old Black jumped and turned his head immediately with raised eyebrows. "What?" Suddenly he smiled, staring at the loops. "You've not caught me this time, Sergeant Liu."

"He wasn't, no. . . ." Moon explained hastily.

Moon knew this sergeant from the police station. A year ago he had often visited her home. Whenever her parents had quarrelled, he came a few days later, pulling a long face and smoking quite a number of cigarettes, talked to her father then to her mother, talked to them time and again, often looking at Moon in a complicated way, before her parents had divorced. On his last visit, he had looked at Moon and sighed heavily.

Sergeant Liu recognized Moon now and asked, "Do you still live by yourself?"

"Yes," Moon answered softly.

He squatted down, looked at the toys for quite some time and, pointing at Snow White and the seven dwarfs, asked, "How much is the set?"

"Not for sale!" Moon's head lowered.

"Not for sale?"

"No. They were made by my father."

"I see. . . ."

Old Black and Eighth Sister stood by quietly. After a long silence, Sergeant Liu sighed, "How's business?"

"All right."

"No one bullied you?" While asking, he raised his head to cast a look at Old Black.

"No," Moon answered softly, head still lowered.

"Have you seen your parents?"

"No...." Moon's shoulders quivered a little, and her hands covered her face. Liu nodded meditatively, then stood up and patted Old Black on the shoulder. "How are you, Old Black?"

"Now look," he smiled, "business is above board. We haven't committed any crime. Ask her, if you don't believe me." He pointed at Eighth Sister.

Liu nodded and said, "All right! Carry on. And take care of her." He indicated Moon.

"Of course. We get along like sisters."

"Sisters?"

"Yes, sisters! The only thing wrong with Moon is she never smiles. You straighten her out! You need to be cheerful to live here, right?"

Liu nodded with approval, "Quite right! Cheer up!"

They all laughed. And Moon laughed too.

The rain abated gradually, but the wind still blew, rippling the rainwater on the ground.

Moon tilted her head to hold the umbrella between her head and shoulder while she picked up Snow White and the seven dwarfs and gazed at them carefully for a long time.

Suddenly she put down the wooden toys, took out the ribbon and cutting it into several pieces with a pair of small scissors on her key ring, tied ribbons round each of the seven dwarfs. Finally she picked up Snow White and tied a ribbon round her waist. She smiled, imagining how Old Black and his crowd would react when she gave the seven dwarfs to them as presents and how Eighth Sister would look with Snow White hung round her neck. Maybe Moon would even be asked to tell them the story of Snow White and the seven dwarfs.

She raised her head to look at the fleeting clouds and wondered how many happy things were waiting for her. Old Black, Eighth Sister, Scraggy Dog and the others must be hoping the rain would stop too. Then there was her fairyland and the children.... Rain, rain, go away!

Translated by Wu Ling



About the Author

Sun Li was born in 1961 in Tianjin. He works in a bank in Tianjin and writes in his spare time. "Rain, Rain, Go Away" is the first story he published. It is taken from the literary magazine Short-Story Monthly No. 4, 1986.

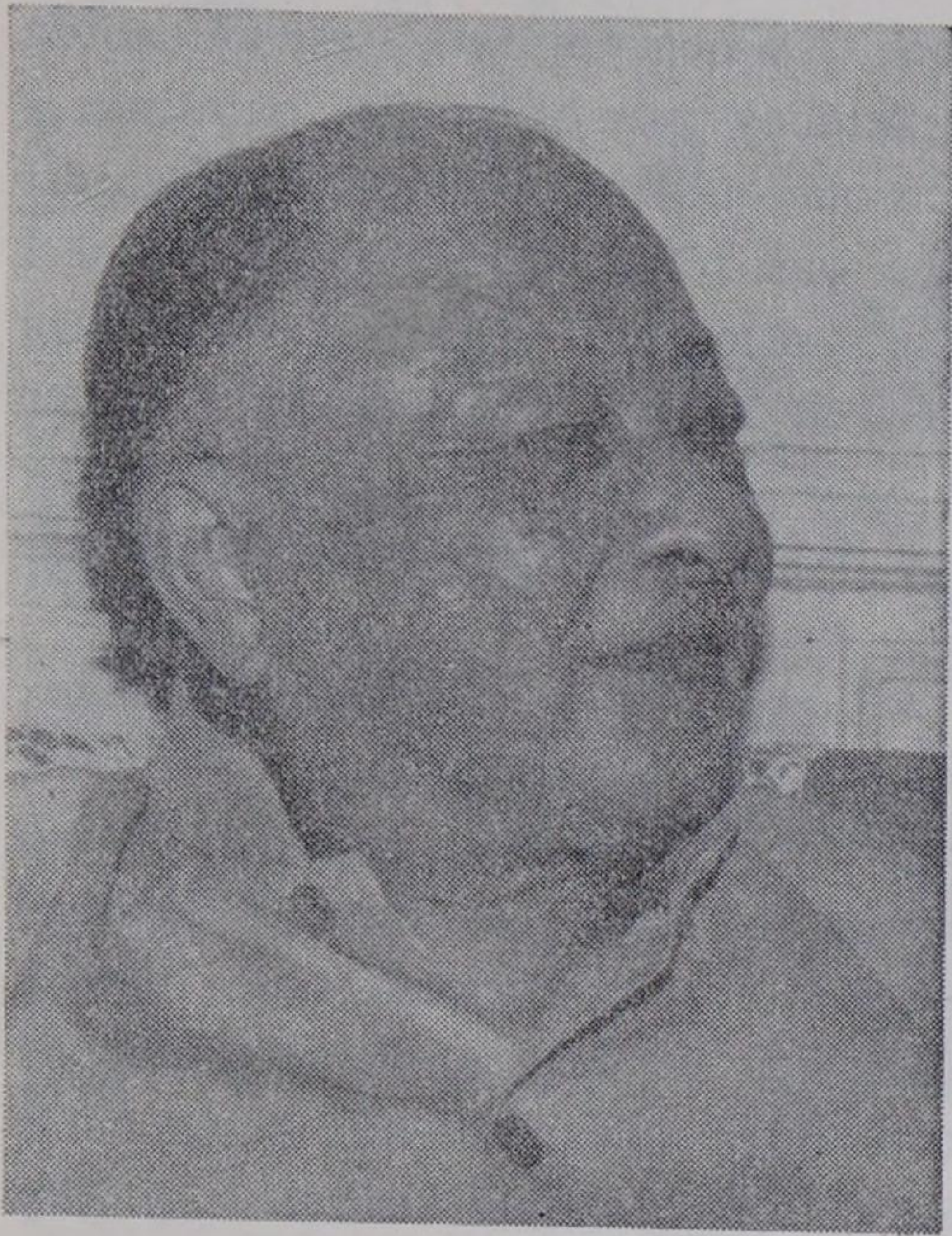
The Flower-and-Bird Painter Hu Kao

Hu Kao was born in 1912 in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province. A lover of literature and art while still a child, he studied Chinese traditional painting, sketching and watercolours at Xinhua Art School in Shanghai. In the early 1930s he became known for his cartoons, and Shanghai film stars felt honoured if they could get a painting from him. Several years later Hu Kao went to Yan'an to join the revolution and experienced military life for over ten years. In the forties he began to publish literary works such as long narrative poems and poetic dramas, and after the establishment of the People's Republic he was appointed chief editor of *China Pictorial* and continued to write and paint in his spare time. He disappeared in the political storms of the late 1950s to the 1970s, until in the early 1980s he reappeared with the publication of two novels, one of which, *Shanghai*, runs to half a million words and has been highly acclaimed by readers. In March, 1986 an exhibition of paintings by Hu Kao was held at the China National Art Gallery, at which many of his paintings in the Chinese traditional style and sketches were displayed. This made him well known as an artist of Chinese painting. His delicate figure paintings, especially his elegant, beautiful and poetic flower-and-bird ink washes, aroused great attention from lovers of art.

Recently I paid a visit to this veteran writer and painter and asked him to tell me about his flower-and-bird painting.

"I know you have studied Western painting, and your figure paintings have left a deep impression on me, an example for me to follow.

Meng Shi is on the staff of *Chinese Literature*.



Hu Kao

But I was very surprised at the excellence of your ink washes at the exhibition. How did you produce such good paintings?" I first asked.

Hu Kao laughed. "My previous sketches and oil paintings laid the foundation," he told me. "I borrow the good points from Western painting when I paint ink washes, paying attention to the layering, composition and essence of the subject. I also obey the six rules of traditional Chinese painting — composition, shape, brushwork, arrangement, colour and imitation. These six rules scientifically summarize the good points of traditional Chinese painting. If you don't follow them, the paintings you paint will be no good. At present some painters do not sufficiently explore the nature of traditional Chinese painting but try to achieve something from other genres on *xuan* paper. That is no good either. The main difference between traditional Chinese painting and other genres lies in the fact that the former demands the most accurate brushwork, unlike oil or gouache, where you can make alterations time and again or even scrape off what you have painted and do it again. But you cannot change a bit doing Chinese painting on *xuan* paper. One stroke is one stroke. No failure is allowed. One cannot master the brushwork of traditional Chinese painting without long training."

According to Hu Kao, good art must display a certain degree of virtuosity; work without expertise is not good work. An artist must have his own character and personality. On this question Hu Kao

said, "I am very strict with my work. When painting I always abide by a principle of Picasso's about sketches: out of twenty paintings I choose one to keep, sometimes even out of fifty, without the slightest wavering. A painting is hung on the wall for several months, but if I am not satisfied with it, I'll tear it to pieces. If I find shortcomings in a painting I have given to a friend, I paint a substitute. I never let my errors disseminate." He laughed again.

"I feel your works are very much like those of Bada Shanren.* Do you imitate him?" I asked.

"That's right," he answered. "I do. His paintings are exquisite, concise and full of creativity. He was one of our greatest painters, China's Picasso. The deformation, exaggeration and naivety Picasso sought had already appeared in Bada Shanren's paintings three hundred years before. His paintings are not repetitious, each on the lookout for whatever is novel, showing the degree of virtuosity of traditional Chinese painting. Of course the sentiment and resentment expressed in his paintings are not things I should imitate. I only borrow his brushwork and technique to express my feelings about life." After a pause, Hu Kao told me a funny thing: "I use two totally different mathematics in writing and painting. When I write novels I do addition, but when I paint I do subtraction. In writing a novel, you first have a general plot and then add a lot of complications and details to it to enrich the novel. But painting is different. I use a lot of brushwork on my draft, but when it comes to the final painting, I try to apply brushstrokes as little as I can. My sole purpose in doing this is, like Bada Shanren, to make the image of my picture reach the highest degree of artistic condensation. So the brushwork must be very concise. We must depict dense subject matter in the simplest brushstrokes."

"From the first day when I decided to imitate Bada Shanren, I have been determined to create something independent of him," Hu Kao continued. "I am still confident of this, because I have two things in my favour: first, the era I am living in is quite different from Bada Shanren's, and he did not experience what I've gone through, that is a time when China is fully open to the world; secondly, I studied Western painting and have a foundation of sketching and colouring which Bada Shanren did not. My paintings are infiltrated with many of the expressions and techniques of Western painting. This borrowing of alien art is very important. It determines a new look in my paintings."

* 1626-c. 1705. Renowned Qing Dynasty painter.



Kapok Flowers

**FLOWER-AND-BIRD PAINTINGS
BY HU KAO**



Yulan Magnolia



Peony

半日無三足星滿天

胡未
辰



Owl

Hu Kao's paintings are not only simple in brushwork but also unique in colouring. Most are executed in a combination of colours and ink, one stroke embodying several colours. As the colours and ink soak into the *xuan* paper, depth, intensity, layering and three-dimensionality are achieved. In painting trees Hu Kao usually has leaves in light ink set off leaves in colours, so as to give the painting a greater sense of layering. In addition, he gives each of his paintings a unified colour tone, applying bright colours to the most important places "as the finishing touch" to make the picture vivid and lively.

Hu Kao also has special regard for composition, striving to make each painting different from the others. He loves to deal with themes other painters have not or dare not. In some paintings, for instance, he has painted the main subjects in the centre, a taboo in traditional Chinese painting. But with Hu Kao's careful handling and arrangement, these works come out well and are very novel. Hu Kao also pays special attention to the place of the inscription and the size and style of the seal, in order to make each painting a harmonious graphic whole.

As an experienced painter, Hu Kao told me with confidence as I bid goodbye to him, "I don't want to be a follower of anybody. I want to establish an independent school of my own. I know this is not easy to realize, especially for a man well on in years like me. But I'll do my best in what remains to me."

Translated by Xiong Zhenru

Rivers of the North

Zhang Chengzhi

I believe that a just and thorough knowledge will sum everything up for us; only then will the significance of the struggles, ponderings, impressions and choices unique to our generation become clear. But at that time we will also regret our past immaturity, errors and limitations, and feel even more keenly the impossibility of living our lives over again. This could be the foundation of a profound pessimism, but given the vastness of our country and the scope of its history, in the end the future is always bright. Within this matrix there is sure to be a certain bloodline, a certain native climate and a certain creative power that will ensure the descent of lively, healthy babies to be born on earth, and the sobs of the sickly and weak will be drowned out by their happy cries. From this point of view, the outlook again becomes optimistic.

He gazed steadily at the river sparkling below. It was right beneath them. The canyon, with countless ravines and gullies crisscrossing its sides, looked like a giant plate of sand. The truck whined as it climbed the slope, and he clung to the rack at the back of the cab, feeling as if he were at the edge of an abyss. Flipping through his atlas and then staring at the plateau and the canyon, he had the impression of looking at two maps which differed widely in scale. This canyon is so deep, he thought to himself, it's hard to imagine it was carved out by rainwater alone. Both sides of the canyon were lined with neat rows of loess caps. No — now he remembered the word

from the geography book — they weren't called "loess caps"; they were called "ridges" and "knolls". One must describe things using these concepts. He carefully surveyed the ridges and knolls once more, and also the ravines and gullies. These deep impressions were actually carved out by rainwater. Staring at the ditch at the side of the yellow dirt road, he absorbed himself in thought. This morning there had been a heavy rain, and the water was still rushing noisily down this little ditch towards the fathomless depths of the Wuding River canyon below. The truck gave a lurch, and grasping the rack at the back of the cab even tighter, he continued to think about the meandering Wuding River deep in its canyon. The turbid yellow river water fiercely reflected the blazing sun of the plateau. The sky was vast and blue, and as clear as if it had been scrubbed. The loess caps — the ridges and knolls — pressed on the sky like the waves of an ocean. These pale yellow, almost white waves melted into and became one with the sky. He felt alive and refreshed, aware of the purity and harmony of nature. Humming "the sky was azure", a line from a folk song, he felt wonderfully at ease. The "Liberation" brand truck carrying him seemed to be skimming along the ridges and gullies as if riding waves.

Facing the plateau, he made an effort to memorize the scene in his field of vision. Knitting his brows, he tried to recall concepts from his text, *The Physical Geography of China*. "Broad meander valley" — suddenly a concept jumped out at him, and he smiled faintly. The textbook had termed this canyon of the Wuding River, through which he was now passing on a truck, a "broad meander valley". Interesting — could there really be that strict a difference between a "broad meander valley" and a "big ditch that turned corners"? But if one were to write the phrase "big ditch that turns corners" or "deep ditch of a river that turns corners between caps of old yellow earth" on one's examination paper, then one's prospects of making it into graduate school would surely be dashed. It seemed there were several even stricter terms in that book, but he couldn't remember them now. At least he had remembered "broad meander valley", and had remembered it while looking at his map and the scenery. "Broad meander valley", he repeated under his breath. Turning around, he grasped the rack behind the cab firmly.

The truck was full of old peasants. Looking at them, he couldn't help smiling again. He was in a wonderful mood today, as good as that of a high jumper who wakes up on the spring morning of a track meet and finds clear skies and no wind. The old peasants were all being tossed about in the back of the truck; some were doz-

ing, some gossiping. The latter were shouting to each other in the crude-sounding Shaanxi dialect, not in the least deterred by the rumbling of the truck's motor and the whistling of the wind. He guessed that these peasants were all on their way back to their villages from successful sales expeditions to the free market. In the morning, buying his ticket at the Suide bus station, he had seen with his own eyes the old man, with a blue-bordered white towel wrapped around his head in the local fashion, booming out in a rough voice, "Lay on another bus, lay on a big car! Hey — lay on a 'Liberation'!" And now here was the same old peasant sitting solidly upright behind the cab, holding forth to someone next to him at the top of his lungs while attentively, but very discreetly, surveying the situation in the truck. That red-faced youth there was a much tenderer specimen: Tightly gripping a yellow canvas shoulder-bag in both hands, he sat alone and silent with his back to everyone else. The boiling clouds of yellow dust thrown up at the back of the truck continually enveloped him. "Jujubes! Riverside-grown jujubes!" He recalled seeing the youth the day before at the town gate in Suide, advertising his wares in a muffled tone. All of them were peasants: simple, prosperous, lovable peasants with minds of their own. Having sold their wares at old Suide town and made their money, they were now returning. That pair of old men, one with a white beard and the other with grey, probably hadn't been to sell produce; rather, they had been to town to visit relatives. All of them were going home, returning from the famous town of Suide in northern Shaanxi to their cave home or compounds along the banks of the Wuding River. Their wives and children had already forced the buckwheat dough through the noodle-maker and swept the mat on the *kang*, and were now waiting for them. The wavelike ridges and knolls, ravines and gullies, the azure sky and the muddy yellow water were all waiting for them. He felt quite contented, as he had ever since he left school. Never mind the dust coming in from the back of the truck; no matter how many times he spit it out with a "Ptoo!" he still felt contented. This turbid river, these endless loess caps and this blue, unadorned sky — all of these made him feel highly satisfied.

He saw a woman standing in the forward left-hand corner of the truck. After a few seconds of inspection he determined that this was a Beijing girl. As she stood quietly with her back to him, he sensed that she was deliberately avoiding him. Students from Beijing who had been sent to work in the countryside could tell one another at a glance; he figured she had noticed him some time ago. The truck bounced over a bump in the road, and the peasants were thrown all

over the place, but she remained standing solidly as before, resolutely refusing to move a muscle. This girl is just like me, a young Beijinger sent to work in the countryside. And she's avoiding me. He was intrigued. Involuntarily, he looked again at her figure, which was not bad.

Whistling happily, he gripped the rack again and turned around to face the barren loess plateau. Whenever the truck went over a bump, he would turn around and look at the passengers. Of all of them he most admired the red-faced young man, who was sitting seriously in the back of the truck paying not the slightest bit of attention to the flying dust. A fine lad, he muttered to himself, using a northern Shaanxi accent. He noticed how quiet and honest the young man looked. A real self-contained, sincere country lad, and quite muscular as well. He unconsciously opened up his hand, and then again casually gripped the rack. He felt his hands were quite powerful; even if this broken-down old truck were to jump a metre into the air it would not shake his hand free. This thought made him pleased. When the truck stops for lunch, he thought to himself, I'll try to have a talk with him in northern Shaanxi dialect. "Slate comes from Qingjian, Wabao's charcoal's not bad; from Mizhi take a good wife, and from Suide a lad." So this lad's wife must be from Mizhi; she might be sewing soles for his cloth shoes at this very moment. Along this route, the river cutting across the plateau, the local atmosphere and characters and the yellow ridges and knolls all refreshed his senses. It was right, he thought to himself; to choose this major was a good idea: geographic science. Just being in this natural environment, surrounded by this kind of people, made him feel happy and carefree. No matter how good majoring in Chinese language had been, it couldn't compare with this; this was truly a career worth pursuing. I shall choose precisely these river systems as the focus of my research, he secretly decided.

The week before, after the graduation ceremony, his phonetics teacher, Mrs Qin, had tried to give him a pep talk, but he had said no, Mrs Qin, let me tell you the truth. This major really does not suit my taste. Just because I got a perfect score on my thesis does not necessarily mean that I was cut out to do work in Chinese phonetics. I want to choose a major that I really enjoy, and then dedicate my life to it. I am truly grateful to you, Mrs Qin. I feel my four years' study of language has been worth it. After all, who can separate himself from language?

Happily, Yan Lin's father was in physical geography. He had never thought, however, that the nights he had spent sleeping out in

the open under the same fur quilt with Yan Lin in the Altay Range would by coincidence become the basis of his choice of a lifetime career. He remembered how, whenever he went visiting at Yan Lin's house in Beijing, the old man would sit on a broken-down old armchair and hold forth on geography. That dried-up, skinny old codger could give an informal lecture that took you from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau all the way down to Hainan Island or from the Taihang Range all the way to Huangguoshu Falls. Racking his brains trying to think of a way to trip up the oldster, he started off on a monologue about all the places he had been to during the early days of the "cultural revolution". But the old man, following his tortuous stream of thought, had come out one by one, as if counting his family jewels, with facts on the geologic formations, the surface features, the names of the rivers, the amount of flooding in the summer and the thickness of ice in the winter in each of the areas. And that wasn't all. He knew the caves in the mountains, the leaves on the trees, the crops planted by the peasants — all of it. Every time he left Yan Lin's house, he was amazed. I never imagined, he now thought to himself, that all the stories he told back then took root in my heart and are now sending forth sprouts.

He highly respected Mrs Qin's studies in phonetics, especially the teacher's theories on dialectal research. When he was writing his thesis, not only had he come to appreciate the cold, hard exactitude of science; he had almost become enchanted by this field of study with its conscientious attention to every sound and its vast sets of rules. However, when he had knocked his brains out until midnight, reducing a chapter of more than three thousand characters to a streamlined two hundred-plus, setting aside his pen at last, rolling himself a cigarette and flopping down on his room-mate's lower bunk, he felt that the whole business did not suit him. Surprised, he felt his heart slowly waking within his breast, becoming moist again layer by layer, and beating steadily against his chest muscles. His heart was like Erbao, who when he was little had climbed on to the windowsill of their house and cheerfully invited him to go out and play crazy games. But this was no good! He grew afraid. Phonology required threefold silence, tenfold minuteness, and quiet sticking to rules as strict as railroad tracks. In studying this major, it seemed, he was being unfair to his young, playful heart. He had been unable to sleep that night; he had spent the greater part of it tossing and turning, trying to sort everything out. Later he had been to call on at least a dozen professors and associate professors, inquiring in a very round-about way about the ins and outs of their fields of study. Then Yan

Lin's father, in Xinjiang on assignment, had been to visit him at school. He had asked the old man, "What would be the best field of study to choose if one were a thirty-plus-year-old 'older youth' with a background of four years' university study of Chinese language, mastery of one and a half foreign languages, six years' experience of physical labour in the Xinjiang countryside, a warm and work-loving character and a good, healthy body?" The wiry old man had replied with curt finality, "Geography. Not the slightest doubt about it. Geography absolutely."

He smiled ironically in spite of himself, his eyes still fixed in a rather blank stare on the young man with the red face. He had never imagined that one conversation with the old man would determine his future, but there it was: in three months, or even two, he was going to sit the exam for admission as a graduate student in cultural geography. If he could indeed sit this exam, he would have no cause to worry about his background in the humanities and the threat of higher mathematics. According to Yan Lin's father, an old professor named Liu in Beijing, who had researched this speciality for many years, now wished to throw open the doors to his monastery and seek a few disciples. All signals were green, and all indications, like the atmosphere of this northern Shaanxi plateau, augured vitality and beauty. In those days of disarray before his graduation, he had chewed his way through a big pile of manuals and booklets on geography from the department as well as a flat text entitled *Surface Water*. Moreover, he had managed to borrow the first volume of the Japanese edition of the German geographer Richthofen's famous work *China*. Now, under a clear azure sky, with the wind filling his sails, he had weighed his anchor and was sailing towards a destination he himself had chosen.

The thing that erased all doubt in his mind was his work assignment upon graduation. "Family Planning Office"! He was enraged. Mrs Qin said regretfully, we're taking special care of you since your home's in Beijing; this was the only job in Beijing assigned to us to fill. He had said nothing, his face steely with anger. He knew that Mrs Qin felt uncomfortable about the whole thing as well; this assignment was a cruel joke in light of the careful training the teacher had given him in the theory of dialectal research. After Mrs Qin had left, carrying a lunchbox, he had suddenly dashed two ceramic bowls to the cement floor in a fit of passion. Stomping on the broken porcelain, he had pushed aside the curious crowd gathered around and rushed out of the cafeteria. Later that day he had gone to the library and borrowed the lecture notes from the geography department.

The young man with the red face suddenly stood up and smiled shyly at him. The peasants on the truck, who had all made a satisfactory amount of money, were now beating the yellow dust off their clothes — the truck was coming to a stop. Surprised, he looked outside the truck: Qingyangping — three large characters painted in white-wash — met his eyes.

As soon as he descended from the truck he felt spots before his eyes. The dizzying sunlight beat straight down on this small town situated on a piece of high, level ground near the river. I seem to have no memory of it at all, he said to himself, surprised. He couldn't remember what scenery and buildings there had been in this town at that time. I was so anxious, my heart was racing; I didn't know where the truck had brought me. Sighing, he walked down a small lane, remembering. In order to avoid letting anyone know he had not bought a ticket, he had tried to guess what direction they were going in by referring to a slender volume: *Atlas for Exchanging Revolutionary Experience*. He had guessed only one thing right: after leaving the east gate of Suide town, the truck had gone nowhere near Jundu or Songjiachuan, but had headed instead towards the southeast, following the canyon of the Wuding River, following the "broad meander valley".

Hurrying forward a few steps, he caught up with the red-faced young man and tapped him on the shoulder: "Laddie." The young man turned his sunburned face around and fixed his limpid eyes on him. "Will ye gang to take a bite with me, laddie?" he asked. On that last trip of his to northern Shaanxi, he had learned three words in the local dialect: gang, ken, and gang wi'. The first meant "go", the second, "know", and the third, "follow" — the third was not all that different from standard dialect, but it had a pure and elegant sound to it, so he had remembered it as well. Now, enthused, he had tried out a sentence on the young man.

The "laddie" smiled shyly again, a healthful, ruddy glow shining off the back of his bare neck. "Mm," he answered, embarrassed.

"Gang wi' me — let's go together!" He was only able to manage half a sentence in local dialect this time, his storehouse having been exhausted. "D'ye ken what I'm talking about?" Suddenly he decided to haul out the last item in his vocabulary. Fortunately, the "laddie" replied indulgently, "I ken," and so the two "ganged wi'" each other along the dirt lane.

The lane was lined with outdoor restaurants and small guesthouses

one after another. He and the "laddie" bought some buckwheat flatcakes stuffed with bean noodles, vegetables and a bit of vegetable oil. The flatcakes were fried until golden and crispy; walking along, he devoured them with relish while chatting with the "laddie", taking every possible opportunity to use the words "gang", "ken", and "gang wi' ". When they paid for their cakes, he caught sight of a skein of vivid red yarn in the young man's canvas bag. Was it for his old lady? he teasingly asked the "laddie". The young man blushed and smiled shyly yet again, turning his clear eyes away. He could imagine what the woman of northern Shaanxi who was going to knit a sweater out of this red thread looked like. He guessed she must surely be sunburned, ruddy and healthy, too shy to lift her head when introduced to someone, dressed in a blue cotton print apron.

"Is it a blend?" The "laddie" handed over the skein for him to see for himself.

"Mm. No — this kind is even better than a blend," he said, praising it. Without a doubt, when local girls tried on their new only blend sweaters, they would certainly love their men who sold riverside-grown jujubes and herded sheep. He had spent six years working in the countryside in Xinjiang, and he understood this much. It was almost time to start off again, so they packed up the yarn and started off towards the dusty truck. Once there, they helped each other up over the sides. We've already become friends, he thought to himself, and his heart felt gladdened.

Soon the truck would reach the west bank of the Yellow River, having followed the Wuding River along some of its length. Soon this "Liberation" brand truck would be on the road next to the Wuding River. He had walked this road one afternoon on an empty stomach. He felt his heart beating, and a feeling of age and regret totally inappropriate in someone of his years rose in his chest. The truck started up and came whining over a mountain spur. As the driver changed gears at the top of the slope and the sound became an even roar, his eyes brightened: he recognized where they were.

This really is the place, he thought silently; this is the very road. I recognize it; I remember. More than ten years ago he had come over this same spur, advancing step by step along this road, which had been crisscrossed by gullies left by thunderstorms. Stuffing the last bit of buckwheat flatcake with bean noodle filling into his mouth, he grasped the rack firmly with both hands and focused his attention on the loess plateau, which at this point began to slope gradually away from them. Look at these ravines and loess caps, sloping towards the Yellow River, he thought. The entire plateau of northern Shaanxi

slopes towards the Yellow River at this point. Absently, he thought to himself: This sloping of the Northern Shaanxi Plateau towards the Yellow River is silent and scarless; it's just the way that red-faced lad is to his wife. It's not like you, he said, making fun of himself; you're only just managing to hold in your excitement. From the gate of Xinjiang University all the way to the railway station you talked about how much you were looking forward to coming here.

"Hey! Hey!" He heard a woman's voice calling him. Turning around, he saw it was she, she who had had her back to him all this time. "Hey, are you going to Hedi Village?" she asked him softly. Her accent was precisely that of an educated youth from Beijing.

They chatted a bit. She said she was a photographer from some newspaper or other; he introduced himself as a recent graduate of Xinjiang University. He felt uncomfortable chatting with her. There was a scent about her that made him feel awkward. A bit irritated, he cut her off and asked, "What school did you go to originally?"

"The girls' middle school attached to the Normal University," she replied, smiling. "And you? Were you sent down to the countryside?"

"Mm, in Xinjiang. Have you heard of Altay?"

"I was sent to the Great Northern Wilderness," she said, without being asked. "I remember that at that time none of the students from Beijing were being sent to Xinjiang — all of them were sent to Shanxi, Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia. . . ."

"I went there on my own," he said. Suddenly he realized he was being a bit too casual with this girl. She must have some business in Hedi Village, and be nervous because she didn't know anyone there. If this weren't the case, she wouldn't have come to the back of the truck; she would have kept on avoiding me. Now she feels she must find someone to help her, so she's come to me. He said earnestly, "Don't worry; Hedi Village is a good place. The residents are very friendly; they don't try to take advantage of people."

She blushed. "I'm afraid there'll be no guesthouse there," she said timidly.

"Don't worry." Look at her; she's blushing. She must not be married yet. "If there's no guesthouse there'll be an inn; if there's no inn there'll be the cave home of a farmer in the production brigade." She is a woman after all, he thought to himself, even if she had a tough life in the Great Northern Wilderness. He stared at the girl before him, graduate of that well-known girls' middle school; only Beijing students like her wore tops like hers, not attractive, but not without taste either, and had their hair permed in a style that made it look not permed.

"I want to take a few photos of the Yellow River from a new angle," she explained. "That's why I got on this truck. Hedi Village is where the Yellow River meets the Wuding River; I thought it might be more interesting than Hukou, Fengling Ferry and Sanmen Gorge."

"Don't worry. If you need my help, I'll be glad to give it." He brought the conversation to an end. Don't prattle with this woman, he cautioned himself. It's no big deal. When the time comes I'll just send her off with the "laddie" to go find his wife, and that'll be the end of it.

Turning around, he gripped the rack once again. This was the same road, but now it looked unfamiliar to him. Time really does erase everything; you've managed to forget even that afternoon you spent walking this road, hungry. You were only twenty years old then, with not even ten yuan in your shirt pocket. After getting off the truck at the small town of Qingyangping you came walking along this dirt road. Not only had you not had any stuffed buckwheat flatcakes to eat; you hadn't had a drop of water to drink since dawn. You walked for so long, passing by row after row of those old loess caps, asking anyone you met, "I'm going to the Yellow River; how far is it?" It was the same here as it had been on the grasslands of Altay: the further you walked, the further people told you it was, a different distance each time you asked. From fifteen kilometres to twenty, and then from ten back to twenty. Now you think it may have been twenty kilometres altogether, because it took you fully half a day. Your sneakers were filled with fine yellow dust; you drank from the clearer ditches. Then you caught sight of an old man sitting in a grass hut selling watermelons, and gritting your teeth you pulled out fifty *fen* to buy one. Chatting with the old man, you told him you had come from Yan'an and had also been to the oil wells at Yanchuan and Yanzhang. The old man said, "From Mizhi a good wife and from Suide a lad, but the girls from Yan'an-Yanchuan-Yanzhang are the worst of the bad." This rather deflated you, but the watermelon was sweet, at least. For the remainder of your walk you picked unripe jujubes of the sort called riverside-grown because they grew along the western banks of the Yellow River. Since the red-faced young man had been selling jujubes at the city gate market, you guessed immediately that he was from Hedi Village. On that day, however, the unripe jujubes were green and bitter, and they made your stomach swell. At least they assuaged your hunger. Happily you sang "Some guerrillas came down from Mount Hengshan". You were free as a bird, daring to jump down cliffs to find shortcuts to the

next stretch of road. You even chased a grey rabbit, which seemed brightly coloured, even dazzling, in this world of loess. You didn't catch it, though; you just worked yourself into a great sweat and lay panting on the hot, dry, yellow earth. And then you really tired yourself out climbing a mountain; the dirt on the road leading up it was soft and squishy, covered with a cracked dry crust but yielding underneath. Setting your jaw, you climbed on, the blinding, venomous sunlight making your throat smoke. You regretted not having saved half of the watermelon to bring along. But at that time your life was like a just-lit torch; your four limbs were wonderfully elastic. You knew that your heart was in fine shape, that your pulse was strong and steady. So you laid a wager of brute strength against that mountain of yellow earth that you could go straight to the top without pausing once. Full of confidence, you set your foot to the surface of the dried loess mud with its network of fissures, and working the joints of your knees you began your step-by-step climb. And then, and then — when you reached the top, you saw the Yellow River.

Suddenly he heard the girl cry shrilly:

"Look! The Yellow — River!"

He gave a start, and quickly turned to look. The "Liberation" had just reached the top of the mountain. This must be that very same mountain of loess — you've forgotten it, he quietly blamed himself, holding his breath. The Northern Shaanxi Plateau was cut off here, throwing itself bravely into the canyon before it. Staring, he noticed how all the ravines at the edge of the plateau straightened out before leaping into the great dim gorge, the legions of loess knolls advancing behind like the crests of waves. Excited, he muttered to himself, "*Hei, Yellow River, Yellow River.*" In the depths of the canyon the faintly glimmering, mighty river came meandering from the far horizon. The lofty blue mountains of Shanxi Province were like a blurry wall standing gravely and silently on the opposite side of the canyon, looking on as the waves of loess ridges and knolls spilled themselves with abandon over the edge. The great river lay deep at the bottom of the canyon, vast and obscure, majestically looking on as Nature bent its waist to worship it. A moist, refreshing river wind caressed the back of the truck; he had already gone forward to the back of the cab and was grasping the rack with paralyzed fingers.

He had not lost this memory. He had kept it safe these ten years and more. He recalled clearly how as a young buck, still wet behind the ears, he had stood, eyes staring and jaw slack, completely awe-struck, on the summit of this mountain and stared at the vast, powerful river which split the continent, separating the world of loess from

the world of boulders. Now he understood: it was precisely this memory which had created in him without his knowledge the desire to return here, and which had pushed him, step by step, towards the kingdom of geography. "I must pass the exam!" he swore to himself under his breath.

"What? Hey, what'd you say?" Suddenly he noticed that the girl with whom he'd spoken earlier was now standing right next to him, holding on to the rack at the back of the cab.

I said, I must pass that exam! The river wind was blowing in his face so hard he couldn't speak at first; it seemed as if the river were emitting a low roar. "The Shanxi-Shaanxi Gorge," he thought excitedly of another geographic term. These words are so hard to chew and digest, he thought. In future, in every paper I write, I am going to change the words "Shanxi-Shaanxi Gorge" to "The Great Shanxi-Shaanxi Gorge". Only then will I feel it's right. To hell with that piddling propaganda job! I want to study geography. He felt that in this instant he had made a lifelong choice.

"Hey! Are you going to take a post-graduate exam?" he heard the girl shouting into his ear, a few strands of her loose, flying hair seeming to touch his face. "I'll pass it for sure!" he shouted, slightly angry, but at the same time charged with enthusiasm. There seemed to be a light diffusing from this girl's body, encouraging him to spill out his heart to her. Of course I'll pass; I've already prepared for it, read all those lecture notes on physical geography from the department. In my four years at university I was enrolled continuously in lecture courses on archaeology. I have one and a half foreign languages, I have phonology and dialectology, and four years of training in the Chinese language major. According to the standards of our speciality, a good number of long editorials are full of grammatical errors. I spent six years in the countryside, and I've seen my share of crazy happenings over the years. I know the key to taking a graduate exam: first of all, there must be no errors in my foreign language, and I must do well in the other important areas; I must even take care to write neatly on the exam paper. I've already finished reading those geography lecture notes; I know all those terms — "broad meander valley" and such — backwards and forwards. I've got more than a hundred yuan saved up, which along with the stipend given me at graduation to pay for transportation to my new job site should come to almost two hundred. I'm going to use this vacation time and this money to travel to several rivers and add to my perceptual knowledge. I'm going from Xinjiang all the way to Heilongjiang, investigating all the great rivers of the north. Just before the exam, I'll play a hard game of

football; that way I'll be clear as a bell. I'll astound them with a combination of accurate recall of the concepts I've studied and the knowledge I'll have gained through my investigations. I'll employ my powers of observation, using strict grammar and careful composition to do an absolutely fantastic job. So I'll pass for sure. And when I've become a graduate student in cultural geography, I'll live on my stipend; I won't even have to go near that family planning propaganda office to pick up my pay. Surely I'll be able to find a place for myself in this world that will make me happy.

Unable to stop himself, he told her all these things that were on his mind. Blinking, she listened to him, thinking all the time how interesting this was. This guy is really something, she said to herself. The trip to Hedi Village with him won't be boring at all. Involuntarily she studied his profile, studied his stiff, coarse hair and his eyes, which she felt burned with brilliance. Listening to his flow of eloquence, she warned herself: Be careful. This man is more mature than you imagine. After all, this is only the first time you have met him.

The "Liberation" came to the bottom of the great canyon. Swerving to the right, abandoning the muddy water and shallows of the Wuding River, it entered a wood of deep green. The Yellow River slid swiftly and steadily southwards, the seemingly swollen surface of the water a vast expanse of white. The rocky mountains of Shanxi on the opposite bank were still a wall of blue. The red-faced young man stood up looking as if he had something in mind to do, and slapping the dust off his clothes picked up his yellow canvas bag. The innocent face of the young man told him: They had arrived at Hedi Village.

They came to the riverbank. As soon as he had emerged from the cave home of the red-faced young man he had taken off like a shooting star in the direction of the riverbank, taking great strides. Only when he came to where the muddy waves splashed against the beach did he look back and see the girl's swaying figure. She's just like a willow, he thought to himself; that camera they've given her weighs her down so much she can only teeter along. He paced the bank, stepping on the egg-shaped stones, which clattered against each other. The viscous water, flashing and trembling, roared as it flowed past like heavy molten metal. It sets the whole broad gorge to quaking, he thought with amazement; maybe someday the mountains on both sides will come tumbling down. This really is the great river of the north. Far off he espied a tree trunk, branches and leaves still clinging to it, being twirled around in the current, now sinking, now rising. Keeping his

eyes on its green leaves he began to run, thinking to match speed with the current. Shouting in his abandon, he felt as if he had dissolved into the hubbub, dissolved on the surface of the river and swept through the long gorge.

She had just mounted a distance lens on her camera, drawing the lens hood forward, and had adjusted the aperture and shutter speed. Wiping her sweat and panting, she put on a burst of speed to run after him. Then she noticed he was standing perfectly still on a small spit that seemed to be travelling upstream.

"Hey! What're you doing?" she called cheerfully, lightly switching the safety on the shutter back to "on" — she had already taken the first picture. She was certain that the multilayered complexity of the Yellow River water, the dim blue mountains on the opposite bank and the silvery light at the confluence of the Wuding and the Yellow River in the distance would make this a very successful shot on her Kodak film. The small guesthouse in Hedi Village was nice and clean, and all her worries had disappeared.

"Hey, say something, graduate student!" she joked, coming up alongside her travelling companion. "I remember it all now," he said. "I knew that as soon as I came here I'd be able to remember."

"Remember what? The geography lecture notes?" she asked with keen interest. She longed to make a few lighthearted jokes with this tall youth.

"No. This rock," he replied. "More than ten years ago, this is where I dived into the river from."

"For a swim?" She looked at him, her head to one side. Standing there silently, he let out a long sigh. Should he tell her? "I got on the wrong truck; you see, at that time the long-distance bus was actually a 'Liberation' truck," he began hesitantly. "I'd been to Yanchuan to see a classmate, and I wanted to return to Beijing. From Suide you have to go to Jun Ferry before you can get to Shanxi, which is on the way to Beijing, but I ended up on the wrong truck. That truck didn't go north to Jun Ferry; instead, it followed the Wuding River to this place. The road had been washed out by a rainstorm; the truck stayed at Qingyangping. In Qingyangping I heard that there was a ferry that crossed from here, so I walked twenty kilometres to get here." He stared fixedly at the river flowing away off to the south, which in the rays of the westering sun seemed as if it were brimming with molten copper. He caught sight of the long shadow the girl cast on the metallic surface of the water, his own next to it. Tell her, he thought. "And from here — this very spot was where I dived in — I swam across the Yellow River."

She was silent for a bit, then asked softly, "Why didn't you wait for the ferry?"

The boat had been due back the next day, and it was going to wait another eight days before crossing again. He had been able to see it resting afar off against the opposite bank. He'd ridden in the back of trucks to go to where his old classmates were working in the countryside: Starting out from Xinjiang, he'd planned to go to Balikun, northern Shaanxi, and Shanxi, and in the end return to Beijing. He'd wanted to see the world, see how his classmates and how people in general lived.

The girl added by way of explanation, "I mean, to swim across — that's terribly dangerous. You didn't want to wait for the boat?"

"I didn't have any money," he explained. "I asked in the village. To stay at the inn and eat fine noodles cost 90 *fen* a day; to eat coarse noodles cost 60 *fen*. I couldn't afford it at that time."

Moved, she gazed at him. "You're really brave," she said.

His heart gave a jump. Why are you telling her all this? Suddenly his mood darkened. He felt the distance between himself and this girl had suddenly got closer, and the scent she gave off confused and troubled him. What rotten luck to have met this girl here today, he thought. I could have been peacefully doing my investigations here by the Yellow River and memorizing my notes. I could have savoured this period of time and all my reminiscences; how precious they would have seemed. But this girl is making me spill everything, and it just seems like so much boasting.

"To swim across the Yellow River. . . . It couldn't have been easy," he heard the girl mutter, as if talking to herself. He realized she had already begun to look directly into his eyes. You aren't afraid there's no guesthouse now, are you? Hmph! he thought angrily. Having let down her guard, she was even more stunning than before. This made him somewhat frantic. Biting his lip, he paid no more attention to her, looking only at the brimming river glinting in the rays of the setting sun.

Lifting up her camera, she took out a zoom lens and put it on. This young man is certainly attractive; he fairly shines with zeal and a sort of heroic spirit. He dared to swim from here to the opposite bank. A breeze came up the river, carrying on it the scent of moist earth, tossing her bangs about and caressing the finger she held poised atop the shutter. He's certainly different from that one I was introduced to. That one had been overseas once, and now spent all day fussing over his piles of foreign stuff. He hardly fixed his eyes on anything else, hardly even on me, she thought, lost in reverie. But this one, this one

who has stated his intention of taking the graduate exam in geography has a pair of eyes that really scorch a body. She stole another glance at him. Look at him, she thought; what is in his eyes? It's the Yellow River.

"Sit down and have a rest," she suggested, as she spread her handkerchief on the yellow sand and sat down herself. The Yellow River flowed before them, stubbornly rushing along. It's not water flowing in this river, nor waves, she thought to herself. "Hey! Look at this Yellow River!" she shouted. "There aren't any wavecrests on it. It's not water, it's not waves; it's chunk upon chunk of solid, primeval fluid. What do you say to that?"

Chunk upon chunk. Hearing this, he thought to himself: This girl describes it in a very strange way, but the even stranger thing is that her description is very apt. Chunk upon chunk of semisolid, slightly rounded yellow fluid moving steadily forward, simple and well-behaved but steadfastly intrepid. And the Northern Shaanxi Plateau jumps down, spills down into its embrace. "That's a very interesting way to put it," he said. "I mean, very descriptive."

"I'm a photographer. In my line of work, one must continually hone one's senses."

"But I think the Yellow River — " He paused. He wanted to give it a try, too. But my senses are not the same as yours, little girl. He felt that unrestrainable pressure building in himself again. Forget it, he warned himself.

"What do you think it's like?" She looked him in the face, interested. He must be a very feeling young man; look at that face, so moving. Taking up her camera, she adjusted the aperture. "Tell me! If you describe it well, I can put your feelings on film." Narrowing her eyes, she challenged him.

"I feel — this Yellow River is like my father!" he suddenly muttered, his voice rough and muted and trembling slightly. "Father," he said. What is wrong with me? Why am I telling her this? But he knew he couldn't keep it in. The girl before him was tempting him to say it. Perhaps it was that scent she had and those narrowed black eyes of hers that were tempting him to speak. He was amazed that in the depths of his heart lay the desire to say all of this to a girl. But he couldn't hold it in.

"Ever since I was very young . . . I've had no father. I forgot about the whole idea of having a father for many years. He abandoned my mother — the dirty bastard." Having spit out this curse, he closed his mouth firmly. The blue-grey mountains of Shanxi on the opposite bank seemed to shift slightly, and now they turned jet black. Look at the

chunks in the river, she thought, silently staring at it. They've solidified. *Ai*, people's hearts.

"I've kept a wish for many years: to grow up to be a big, strong man, go to find him, and bash his face in in front of his wife and kids." He felt his teeth grinding against one another. With a great effort he forced his feelings down and said no more. This girl would never even have guessed at this kind of thing; she can probably not even imagine this sort of thing happening. But I have an amazing mother — I'll tell you, all those so-called female heroines, old female cadres and women revolutionaries will never be able to compare with my mother. With her, my life is complete. I never learned to say "Daddy", that sickening word, and I never thought I should have a father. He struck a match with trembling fingers and lit a cigarette. But today you've suddenly discovered you must have a father, and in fact you've already found one for yourself. He exhaled a cloud of smoke and said to himself: Wow, today has been a good day; you've found yourself a father — and this is he, the Yellow River. Absorbed in silent thought, he sank deep into his feelings. But when he caught sight of the pair of compassionate black eyes next to him, he felt ashamed. You're too soft; you're not tough at all. You couldn't stand it; you went and casually told her everything. You, how could you reveal your secrets so easily to a woman?! He felt completely humiliated. Holding back his anger, he rose from the sand and strode out on to the spit. He wanted to get away from that woman; he had even begun to detest her, because with her hateful black eyes and some sort of bewitchment she had deprived him of his self-control. Coming to the edge of the river, he let the water splash on his feet and thought to himself that the river water of the summer season was at once rough and warm. Forgetting the woman behind him, he was absorbed in the fullness of this river's mystery.

Yes, it really is my father, comforting me roughly yet warmly. "Fa — ther," he muttered to himself, testing the sound of the word, and immediately he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. The far-off river water was rising in swells of unbelievable height. Tell me everything, Yellow River. Let me write it all on that examination paper so that the old men marking it will gape and stare. That won't be an examination paper; it will be a song, a poem, an eternal melody telling of father and son. Can the exam paper of those old men possibly contain it? Never. It is a secret that can never be written and must never be told to anyone else. How stupid you are, he chided himself. You've forgotten whether when you crossed the Yellow River that time you had any revelation or special sort of feeling. You were just

like a happy little duck, following its northern Shaanxi peasant master. You stuffed your clothes and shoes into your oiled sheepskin bag and dived with a flourish into the water. You rode the truck without buying a ticket, and walked twenty kilometres along the loess road that wound through the gullies and ridges. With only a bit of watermelon and some unripe jujubes to eat, you came as if driven by fate to swim this river. You swam across, arriving in Shanxi the same day. Could it be there was no god aiding you? Could it be there was nothing special protecting you? As you swam, you felt the same pleasure you felt when swimming in any swimming pool or reservoir, or in the Miyun-Beijing Canal; you were relaxed and not at all strained. You left those villagers grasping floats made from inflated oiled sheepskin bags behind you. Not only did you not get cramps in your arms and legs; you felt the power and ease with which they moved through the water. You crossed the greatest river of the north, and then walked ten more kilometres along a road through the Shanxi mountains with their green rocks, arriving that evening at a small village near Liulinzhen. The next day, you hitchhiked on a truck to Jiexiu, where you boarded the "International Women's Day Red Flag Freeloader Line" train* back to Beijing. Later, when you told your classmates you had swum across the Yellow River, Erbao and Xu Huabei had nudged and winked at each other and said they had swum over too, and what is more had done the butterfly stroke all the way. . . . Practically every step of that journey would be impossible today. There is only one possible answer, and today you have found it: the Yellow River is your father, and he is secretly protecting you, his young son.

He lifted his head. The Yellow River, stretching across his whole field of vision, rushed along, its entire surface reflecting red. The river is burning, he thought to himself. The evening sun, now sunk behind the Northern Shaanxi Plateau, had ignited a strip of clouds, which now scattered over the canyon. The whole river's turned red; it's burning. It may be that it's burning for me, he thought. The coppery waves were now clearly outlined, rising heavily one after another. His eyes felt scorched by this world of red. He was reminded of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*; before, he had never deigned to give the painting a thought, but now he understood. In Van Gogh's eyes, the starry sky was like a twisting, tumbling river; in his own young eyes, the Yellow River seemed like a fierce fire burning on the land of the north. The towering peaks in Shanxi across the river were dyed red; he could

* So called because it was exclusively staffed by women railway workers and could be ridden free by youths on trips to "exchange revolutionary experience".

hear this divine river of fire calling him. My father, he thought dazedly, standing and staring at the stream, you are revealing your true feelings to me. He unbuttoned and removed his jacket.

Staggering, she rushed over and took hold of his arm.

"What are you doing?" she shouted, gasping. "Surely you're not going to dive in!"

Turning around, he gazed at the girl, puzzled.

"No! It's too dangerous!" She shook her head firmly. What a proud man he is; he thinks I don't believe his tale of heroism. "I know you're capable of swimming across. . . . You've already swum across once," she said, grasping his hand and not letting go. "But there is no need to do it now; it's too dangerous!" She was shouting, hoping to drown out the thundering of the river.

Carefully he withdrew his hand and sized her up. What was this girl's problem? It seemed that every time a real man came to an important pass, he must not have any women about. They always stirred things up, made one feel uncomfortable. They certainly had this ability.

"Don't swim across; it's too dangerous," she pleaded, lifting her face towards him. "Let's just talk for a while. Or we could take a few more photos, and you could think over your notes while looking at the river scenery." The heavy camera with its bulky zoom lens was swinging in front of her chest; it seemed to him the weight of the camera would break her long neck. He thought of helping her carry the metallic object.

"Go and take your pictures; go take a walk over there," he muttered huskily, subdued. "I have a little private business; you'd best be off."

"No!" she yelled. "This is the Yellow River! Do you understand?" Clenching her small hands into tiny, laughable fists, she waved them about.

If I don't understand, how could you? A deep anger enveloped him. Who told you to get together with a girl? Look what a fuss she's making. If she understands anything, it's probably just how to do her hair so that men will look at it a second time. Biting his lip fiercely, he almost felt like letting fly with some good, hard curses.

"Hey, listen. I don't even know you. Haven't you already found your guesthouse?" He made an effort to speak in measured tones.

This scared her off, and she retreated a few steps. He saw her expression harden, the emotion draining from her face. "OK. You do what you want," she said quietly, her two hands holding the camera

in front of her chest. He could see the pain and accusation in her eyes.

He stared at her, surprised. Suddenly she was touching, a pure and holy statue. You're really something, you girls. No wonder I came right out with the deepest secrets of my heart, although I had never told them to anyone else. Apologetically he rubbed his hands: "I'm sorry," he said. "I have a quick temper."

"You're too fierce," she said in an injured tone. Why do they have to be this way with other people? she thought. I've already seen through them; in their deepest consciousness, they're all the same. "Just now — just now I felt you were being very honest and open with me. I'd thought you —"

"Just now I was talking through my hat." He cut off her speech. I'm ashamed I told you all that, he thought to himself. "Don't take it seriously."

"No! People should learn how to be more open!" she insisted passionately. "Besides — " Besides, you've no need to be so proud. As for the flavour of life, it may well be that I've tasted a lot more of it than you. Blushing crimson, she said suddenly in a trembling voice, "I don't have a father either, and it's also been a long time since I've said the word 'Daddy'. And what's more . . . I am also pained by this word."

"What?" He was surprised.

"He used to work in the janitor's office of a middle school; he rang the school bell. They said he'd been a Kuomintang soldier before Liberation, that he was one of the leftover dregs and evil remnants of the old society. In 1966, they beat him to death. Right in that janitor's office. I was twelve that year, in the sixth form of primary school." She spoke quietly, her eyes fixed on him all the while.

"Oh, I understand." He met her gaze coolly. "Go ahead, curse me! I was a Red Guard back then."

Sighing, she shook her head wearily. "No, I won't curse you. I can see at a glance that you're not the same as those others. They were —"

"Dogs!" He spit out the curse from between his teeth.

"You're really too coarse," she said sadly. In the softness of her voice he could feel her trust and her nearness.

"What happened then?" he asked in a subdued tone.

"My mother was ill with glaucoma. The doctor said that any shock might make her lose her sight. So I . . ." She lowered her head. He saw her black hair flying in the wind. "I went alone to the janitor's room and washed the blood off my father's body. That blood, that blood —"

"Stop!" He turned away.

Her lips slightly parted, she stared at his shoulders, then plopped down dejectedly on the sand, which having been baked all day in the scorching sun of the plateau warmed her pleasantly. Her spirit was at rest. That's right, stop. Don't speak of it anymore. He understands everything. I have told him everything, just as he told me everything.

He stood silently facing the Yellow River, the wind caressing his bare chest. I can't imagine what it must have been like, little sister, he thought. He really couldn't conceive how this ebony-eyed, slight girl could endure such a profound trial.

At this point the Yellow River took flame again. The coppery waves rose slowly, and the entire canyon seemed to fuse into a single brilliant flame. The valley was filled with rising mists, and he saw before him a ball of reddish colour that was at once rushing, twirling, leaping, roaring and crooning. It's calling me, he thought; look at these rolling orbs of colour. My father, the Yellow River, is calling me. Quickly, he cast away his jacket and took off his trousers, and rolling them into a ball he walked towards the girl. "No, it's too dangerous," she pleaded, raising her head. Again he clearly heard the trust in her words. He felt a stab in his heart. "Take them; wait for me," he said quietly. "See where the ferry is moored on the opposite bank? I'll take that ferry back." Seeing her hair blowing in the wind, it took all his strength to resist the temptation to reach out and stroke it. It's getting late, he thought, and stealing a last glance at her hair, he swiftly turned and ran towards the flame that rushed along before him.

She stood up, tightly hugging the bundle of rumpled clothes he had given her, which smelled strongly of male sweat and tobacco. Oh dear, she thought, surprised. I believe I've fallen in love with him. But she chased this thought away immediately. A solemn expression gradually stole into her black eyes. Slowly she lifted her heavy camera, letting the wad of clothes drop on to the sand. Quickly checking the left and right of her field of vision, she let the cold metal viewfinder come to rest lightly yet solidly against her eyebrow. Without making a sound, she adjusted the focus ring on the lens, silently analyzing the interaction of the picture in her viewfinder with the feelings flashing through her mind.

A scene of beauty met her eye: the clamorous river overcast with rose-tinged clouds, its waves surging turbulently, the angles of their crests clearly defined. In the middle of her frame a half-naked, broad-

shouldered man was running, arms outstretched, towards the mighty torrent.

A slight, nervous smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. At the exact moment when the man threw himself into the water, his body horizontal, she firmly pressed the shutter button.

He steered himself straight towards the mountains on the opposite bank, his two arms threshing the water evenly. I'll swim just this way, he thought, taking care not to stroke too hard, and also being careful to kick with a steady rhythm. You always like to use too much force. I remember that time I swam in just the same way, doing the breast-stroke, keeping my head above water. One has to keep an eye on the waves that come down from upstream. And one must absolutely not get cramps. He felt his entire body soaking comfortably in the warm river water, but at the same time his every nerve was taut. When you clambered on to the bank on the Shanxi shore, you jumped up excitedly and yelled "Hurrah!" but you did not know that elsewhere a twelve-year-old girl was wiping the blood from her father's body with a towel. "What an idiot you are —" he muttered to himself, but a wave hit him straight in the face, forcing him to swallow the last half of the sentence. Only now do I understand that it was due to the protection and the indulgence of my father, the Yellow River, that I succeeded in swimming across. With this thought he paused for a moment. The water was highly buoyant; he enjoyed the sensation of his body being supported by the turbulent swells. It's true; the Yellow River is protecting me, he thought. Again a *frisson* of excitement swept through his heart. Then he took careful aim once more at the Shanxi riverbank, centreing on the majestic Lüliang Range. As waves struck him he exhaled, inhaling as they carried him upon their crests. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the drops of water rolling off the muscles of his shoulders. I am grateful to you, girl reporter; you gave me some valuable criticism, and at the same time showed faith in me. Despite everything, you could understand me. Yes, it's true: At that time I was an honest-to-goodness Red Guard, but I never beat anyone, much less that janitor father of yours. However, I am willing to assume my share of responsibility. I will never forget your story. He felt serious and subdued, but at the same time he felt his heart had become richer. He focused his attention again on swimming, and now he caught sight of the midstream.

Suddenly he was in it, and he felt the full force of the Yellow River sweeping him recklessly along. A small fish brushed against his thigh, sending a shock like electricity through his body. A few more fish hit him, each one like a bolt of clarity. He could almost hear the voice of

the schools of fish. But the surface of the midstream was quite flat, sliding along like a piece of solid matter. I admit my responsibility to you, twelve-year-old girl, he thought, since at that time I jumped into the water without a single misgiving, carefree as a little duck, and since I didn't know then how to understand and care about the suffering in this world. He discovered he was being swept southward by the powerful midstream, and pointing himself anew towards the opposite bank, he set to swimming. Yellow River, he called silently, I am no longer that simple little duck. The Yellow River responded with its rumble, and the cliffs on the Shanxi bank drew nearer. I'm already close to the rock wall, he thought; the rock wall is moving, going towards the north. Taking a deep breath, he swam with intense concentration.

Gradually he felt his deltoids becoming sore. I'm tired, he thought with a slight sense of alarm. Last time I didn't feel tired at all; I remember only ease, relaxation, comfort, liveliness. Now you're tired only halfway across, and moreover you didn't walk twenty kilometres beforehand, and in your stomach you have a fine stuffed buckwheat cake, not unripe jujubes. Buddy, you're getting old. An icy chill suddenly enveloped his heart. More than ten years have flowed past, just like the water of the Yellow River, yet although you are not fully an adult, your flesh is betraying you. Don't you dare betray my youth! "Damn it, while I live, I won't let you betray it!" he cursed out loud. Pulling himself to the top of a wave, he took a breath of air, his cheeks seeming to burn with fever. He remembered how the girl had blamed him. You're always cursing, he thought to himself. In these ten-odd years, you've become a barbarian. But in that time how much have I experienced. . . . I've become a barbarian, but I've also become civilized. I've received a university education in the speciality of Chinese language, I'm going to be a graduate student in geography; it's not that I don't know how to be refined and gentle. But don't curse again in front of that girl, he admonished himself. You don't know whether she's changed or not during the same stretch of time. You don't know whether her surprising hardness and her gaze have betrayed her during this time. You must be a bit gentler with her. A girl who has had such an experience at the age of twelve needs some warmth, and that includes warm language. He swam with renewed effort. By now he had almost passed the midstream with its seemingly solid, sliding surface and had caught sight of the current on the eastern side, which was shallower and slower but which had large waves.

His heart began to thump with excitement: The eastern bank was already quite close. He felt a lump in his throat, and his breathing

grew somewhat laboured. Ah, my father, the Yellow River, has protected me once more. I can swim the last two hundred metres slowly and steadily. My body has not betrayed me, and my deltoids have overcome their weariness; they have accepted the orders of my youth. I have not yet become old, he thought happily. I can help that girl out: I can find the rat who took the initiative in beating her father, with his airs like a lord, and teach him a lesson. "Son of a bitch!" he swore again. At this moment he emerged from the midstream. The current slowed abruptly, and he began again to take care lest the waves swamp him. But the business of teaching that little lord a lesson should be left to her boyfriend or husband, he mused; as for me, I'll just invite her to a meal. And while we're eating, I'll sing her a Kazakh love song from the banks of the Ertix River, make her feel that most of the people in the world are good after all and that she hasn't been wrong about me. And then I'll devote my energies completely to the study of geography.

Swimming through the surging waves, he now came to a spot about twenty metres from the riverbank. The rock face before him, covered with green moss, seemed to sweep past swiftly. This water is moving too fast, he thought. At this instant he caught sight of a great boulder sticking up from the bottom of the river that was advancing on him swiftly. Curling up his body, he sprung himself away from the rock with his feet, and it flew past, half submerged, half exposed. It's flowing too fast, carrying me downstream. He grew anxious. With determination he drew up his shoulders, gathering his energy, and swam the crawl in a sprint straight towards the Shanxi rock wall, the green moss of which he felt was already within reach. But the river water still carried him in its grip swiftly downstream. The fissures and lines in the rock face before him flashed past so fast it hurt his eyes. His arms and hands suddenly became soft and paralyzed, and he felt a leadlike weight pressing on his shoulders. The pain in his muscles was unbearable. As the current swept him in its embrace along the rock face, he espied another terrible boulder looming up in his path. He let out a strangled roar. He despised the boulder, for he knew that victory was already his. Using all the strength in his body, he hurled himself towards the shore. As he saw the corner of the steep boulder flash past, he seized hold of it. Immediately his body was forced parallel to the shore by the current and was flipped and tossed about as a tremendous force pulled on his arms. With grim determination he clung to the boulder with his right hand as he noticed the turbid white wake that gurgled from around his shoulders and the soles of his feet.

He closed his eyes contentedly. The warm, sandy water flowed past, caressing his body, following the direction pointed out by it. As the muddy yellow waves slapped against him, the sound all around him became a roar. O Yellow River, my father, he thought, I thank you. And then he pulled his two legs out of the current and stepped firmly on to the solid bank.

2

He stared absently into the darkness outside the train window, a glowing cigarette between his fingers. The train swayed, and the forests, hills and fields on the other side of the glass were a flowing stream of black. So the train is actually a river, he thought as he silently smoked, traversing the Lanzhou-Lianyungang line and then suddenly changing course to flow swiftly north, its lights ablaze, its whistle screaming, its wheels a-rumble with a great noise. And the people on the train are the river's water and waves. He saw the glow of his cigarette reflected in the window. The train is also a river. He exhaled a cloud of smoke. This is really not a bad way to study geography: travelling to rivers, following their courses. Even I seem like a river. Expelling another puff of smoke, he watched the glow of his cigarette appear once more in the jet-black glass.

That time, it had been like this too: The train had been packed with students on trips to "exchange revolutionary experience", and he had sat in the freezing cold passage connecting two cars. The steel floor had had the same little ridges on it to keep people from slipping, and it had unceasingly bumped and swayed in precisely the same way.

That was your first train trip ever, the first time you had ever thrown yourself into a raging river. He slowly exhaled another cloud. Back then, naturally you did not know how to smoke — much less how to drink, ride a horse, or tow a fat log along a snowy slope in the Altay Mountains. All you could see in this dark glass back then was a baby face, its two eyes shining with a puerile light. Back then you lacked even the ability to make friends with someone like the red-faced young man, and you had never embraced and clumsily kissed a girl. The heart in your breast, as lively as a little rabbit, was so excited by the challenge of the wide world that it would give you no peace. You were still a child; you could leap into this river without even thinking.

Later, you passed through town after town, getting to know and

measuring yourself against society, politics, nature, and a great many complex personalities. You dared to yell out loud in crowded meetings, dared to sing and shout at the top of your voice while walking at night in the empty, terrifying mountains. When you fell off your horse, the horse rolled over on to your soft body. You didn't trust the road, and guided by your compass, you stubbornly insisted on climbing mountains in your way. Eventually you grew to love the frontier, and went on jaunts to Chungar, to Altay, to Yili. You returned with the air of an adult about you, despising the delicacy of those students who had only visited large cities. Pulling a long face (covered with peeling skin baked red-brown by the sun), you sailed by them like a wind, your nose in the air. You didn't know — there was no way you could have known — that a twelve-year-old girl was weaving a very different sort of tale. In those days you did not understand tears, did not understand the toll life exacts; you did not know that history also has its pain.

The reflection of a slender figure appeared in the pitch-dark windowpane. He turned. "You're still awake?" he asked.

Smiling, she studied him. We'll arrive in Beijing before dawn, and he'll go off on his own to find his geography study materials. "Go sleep for a while, graduate student," she said. "I've already spoken with the conductor; the door to the sleeping car is open."

"No, I'm fine here," he said.

"Go on, you can still get a few hours' sleep," she urged. "We'll take turns on the couchette."

"I'm not sleepy," he insisted. "It's cool here. It's stuffy and hot in the sleeping car."

Then I won't go either. Spend a few more hours in his company, she thought. There are only a few hours left. At daybreak, when they walked out of Beijing Station in the morning light, this young man who had swum the Yellow River would take his leave of her. Ai, and we'll go our separate ways. "Let's talk for a while," she said, placing a book on the chilly steel floor before sitting down.

They sat, silently hugging their knees, engrossed in their individual thoughts. The constant jerking of the train caused their shoulders to bump together at intervals. So close, she thought to herself. I'm sitting so close to a man. This may have been a very valuable friendship. We've exchanged so much; we've told each other about our fathers, and I've seen him swim across the Yellow River with my own two eyes. Suddenly the lights in the passage went out, leaving only the periodic glow of his cigarette between them. That guy before — hunh,

I've even forgotten his name, she thought. He knew me for a long time, but we never got as close as this.

He stared at the blackness outside and smoked in silence. Rivers really are magical, he thought; you've been in love with them ever since that time. When you worked in the production brigade in Altay, you were always trying to get jobs that would bring you into some kind of contact with the Ertix River. You'd vie to be the one to go to the swamp to search for a lost draught horse, or to follow the dirt road by the river to make a grain delivery. When the wildflowers opened in June, you couldn't wait to swim, and eventually you grew accustomed to the icy, bone-chilling water of the rapids. Once when you were casting a net in the freezing water with three fishermen from Burqin, you caught a twenty-kilo catfish. And on your way back to Beijing to visit your family, you had to cross every river you saw — it was like some kind of addiction. In time, it was decreed by fate that you cross the Yellow River. Back then you worshipped your life of bravery and freedom, and you thirsted to experience the proverbial "beating of one thousand five hundred kilometres of waves". You truly believed you were being completely remoulded, growing fast and strong; you looked eagerly forward to the great revolutionary task that was to be yours. You were resolute and self-confident; using your own standards, you divided humanity into portions and then loved or hated each group with equal ferocity. That there might be other possibilities did not occur to you at all; you never imagined there might be a twelve-year-old girl who would revise your history lessons for you.

Suddenly he turned to her and said, "Hey, don't forget: I want to take you out to eat. What kind of food do you like?"

Tilting her head, she said coyly, "I like the Western food at the Moscow Restaurant."

"Fine," he said. He remembered his decision taken in the middle of the Yellow River. I must remember this, he thought, and not forget it in the press of business. In a few hours he'd be in Beijing; he had a very clear idea of what he must do during his few weeks here. He sighed softly. Gird yourself for the battle, he thought.

In the cave home of the red-faced young man next to the Yellow River, she had asked him where he planned to go next. He'd said he was planning to follow lines of transportation to go make an investigation of the landscape and customs along several rivers. "Back to Beijing," he said. "It's been a whole year since I've been home!"

Hesitantly, the girl said that she still had an assignment to com-

plete in Qinghai, and that she would also like to take some more pictures of the scenery and local colour along the tributaries of the Yellow River. She hoped she could accompany him. Laughing, he answered, sorry, photographer. Since even a place like Hedi Village had a guesthouse now, he figured there really was no need for him to accompany her on her assignment.

She blushed and countered, "No, what I mean is that you could make investigations of the rivers there. There's one called the Huangshui River."

He sighed and said, "I know the Huangshui very well. The year before last, our class made a survey of the local dialect there. However, I suppose that trying to go south by driving my chariot north —"

"Oh, wonderful!" she cried excitedly, "We'll go together! You're familiar with the area; I was worried that —"

"I'm a poverty-stricken student." He cut her speech short. "I'm coming from Xinjiang, going to Beijing. I can't turn around here in Shaanxi and head west for a romp in Qinghai. I only have a hundred and some yuan altogether, and I still want to take a trip to Heilongjiang." The Heilongjiang River, he thought. An investigation of the Heilongjiang River will be the grand finale in my programme this time around. The Heilongjiang River will be my last stop. It's at the end of that part of the north.

"Surely we can figure something out," she said. She wasn't planning to part with this young man so soon. The drops of water in his hair had not even dried yet, and the picture in her mind of the male figure walking towards the Yellow River in the evening light was really too stirring. That photo I took will be a winner for sure, she thought. "For instance, say I hire you as a guide. I'm on assignment, and I can hire guides at my destinations. A lot of expenses could be covered in this way...." She was completely absorbed in the idea she had just come up with. "The train and bus tickets do present somewhat of a problem, though...."

She noticed that he was listening attentively. "It's a good idea," he said tentatively. "I really wouldn't mind taking a trip to an upper tributary of the Yellow River."

Three days later, they stood by the banks of the Huangshui River. The strong ultraviolet rays of the plateau sun shone on their heads as they walked towards a small town called Gaomiaozi. In the midst of a patch of deep, shady green, they caught sight of a glazed tile roof shining golden in the sunlight.

Emerald-green wheat grew in the fields by the side of the road,

swaying evenly in the wind. Climbing a slope, they gradually distinguished a loess terrace, and the banks of the Huangshui, hemmed in by low hills. On the iron-grey floodplain were a number of wheat fields as square as chessboards. A string of patterned headcloths bobbed among the rows. These were Qinghai women, squatting in the field weeding, he explained. The men here did not know how to pull weeds. After pulling the weeds, the women would carry them home in baskets to feed to their goats. Goats were many and grass scarce, so there were not many weeds in the wheat fields. They stopped for a bit and looked at the winding bank of Huangshui as it flowed onward. Beyond a group of low loess hills, clouds obscured a line of snowy peaks. Beyond that range of mountains is Tibet, he explained, pointing. We are standing on the edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. "Listen!" Suddenly she held up her hand, silencing him —

The green branches, the emerald leaves have spread:
June is upon us

The string of women in patterned headcloths had begun to sing, their strident voices rising and falling. "This is 'Young Man', a type of Qinghai folk song," he explained. "You may have heard of 'The Flower and the Young Man'; 'Flower' is another type of local folk song." She nodded her head in sudden recognition. I'd thought "The Flower and the Young Man" referred to a boy and a girl, she thought. The people here are really interesting. What a romantic name: The flower and the young man. A feeling of contentment swept through her, a feeling of relaxation and comfort she had not had for a long time. Now the low loess hills of Qinghai, the broad floodplain of the Huangshui, the deep green of the wheat, the dim and distant peaks separating them from the far-off, mysterious realm of Tibet, and the folk song of these women whose headcloths formed a line in the field combined to put her in a peaceful, tranquil mood.

Ai yo yo, I've been in the streets of Xining Town
Three is a millstone that goes *dang dang*
Ai yo yo, I've been to see that young girl
There is a fire that drives one mad

The weeding women were still singing to their hearts' delight, absolutely carefree. She listened to his explanation of the lyrics, and felt her face grow a little hot. Well, buddy, she thought silently, you have fire that drives one mad as well; travelling with you makes one both tired and distracted. His rhythm is too fast. Starting out

from Hedi Village, we first flagged down a tractor, and then at Qingyangping, halfway to our destination, we switched to a truck. The next night we made it to Tongchuan, and by daybreak we were on the train to Qinghai. She felt she'd barely had a chance to pause for a breath, and she was always thinking of tugging on him and making him stop for just a little while. She gazed at the Huangshui flowing by below and felt as if she were in a dream. The winding banks, the emerald wheat, snowy mountains, low hills and patterned headcloths — all these plus the artless folk song with its exquisite modulation combined to make her somewhat dizzy. Although she felt calm and contented, she was drooping with weariness, and she would have liked to lean on something, close her eyes and rest for a bit, forgetting this incessant rushing about, forgetting the Wuding River in its canyon and the Yellow River under the evening clouds, forgetting the excellent photo she had decided to name *Son of the Yellow River*. She needed to collect herself, to rest awhile her tired mind and body, to make herself understand and realize she had already arrived in Qinghai, arrived at the banks of the Huangshui River. Very soon she would have to set her jaw, pull every nerve taut, and set out to seize the special essence of this Huangshui, collecting the entirety of colour, mood, atmosphere, tableau, and flowers and young men on to her Kodak colour slides.

He led the girl into Gaomiaozi town, heading straight towards the temple with the yellow glazed roof tiles. He was quite familiar with this area, as he had come here two years before with a dialectology fieldwork research group from the department of Chinese of Xinjiang University, led by Mrs Qin. He had learned many things in the towns, both large and small, that lined the Huangshui. He had taken part in exacting phonological research and had collected several dozen songs of the "Young Man" genre. "Take a look at this temple," he lectured, sounding just like a travel guide. "This type of temple roof is called a 'helmet roof' — it does look rather like a steel helmet, doesn't it?" He gazed appreciatively at the twin curves formed by the outline of the dilapidated tile roof. Luckily I depended throughout college on archaeology courses in the history department for my elective credits, he thought; I can depend on my knowledge of Chinese dialectology and of cultural anthropology to help me master half of the entire field of cultural geography. As for the other half — physical geography — I can devour those lecture notes and texts to gain knowledge in that. He again felt supremely confident about the exam he was going to face. "We'll go call on an old man in a bit. He lives on the riverbank beyond the temple," he told her. "He dug

an irrigation ditch the year I was here to lead water from the Huangshui to a patch of poplars he had planted." He shot a glance at the grove of trees visible next to the temple roof, and seemed to recall the way things had looked that year. "I wonder how tall those trees of his have grown."

Putting her camera down and surveying the temple with its yellow tiles critically, she shook her head. It lacked composition, and it wasn't all that interesting anyway. "Let's go." She gave him a slight push. There are old buildings like this everywhere; there's nothing here that reveals the essence of the Huangshui. "Let's go visit your old man who plants trees and digs ditches." She shook back her black hair, which had fallen forward. She felt she had calmed down, recovered the state of mind which enabled her at any time to take up her camera and press the shutter with sensitive reflexes. Now I can knock about with him wherever he pleases, she thought, fondling her camera, which was cool as ice. Everything is ready.

He strode ahead. Two years before, when he had come to Gaomiaozi by himself, he had met this old man named Gao. He'd walked into a courtyard walled with rammed earth and asked the old man for a drink of water to assuage his thirst. The old man had set out a table on the verandah and placed a cup and a teapot on it. A girl with a red string around her pigtail had brought out a large platter from the house with four enormous steamed buns on it. When he asked what the purple spots were on the buns, he was told they were rose petals from their own garden. This was the first time he had ever seen buns made this way, and he was struck by the novelty of it. After a while the old man went out, his spade over his shoulder, instructing the girl to keep the young man's teacup full. The girl was pretty and vivacious, and took great care in filling his teacup as she stood on tiptoe. After he had drunk his fill of the slightly salty tea, he took his leave of the little courtyard with its verandah in front and its storeyed house in back. Nearby, on the banks of the Huangshui, he saw the old man standing alone under the hot sun. When he went over to thank him, he saw that the old man was using his spade to direct a ditch full of gurgling water into a small grove of poplars. When the flourishing grove of tender young trees had been given a good soaking, the old man told him that this grove was his substitute for a son. When asked why, he replied, I have no heirs, my child. A single old man can only be a burden on his granddaughter. Ten years from now, this grove will be good timber, and I can sell it for money. That way, when the time comes that I'm too old to move about, I won't have to hear any complaints. He remembered how

after hearing all this he had been unable to speak for a long, long time. He could only stare blankly at the little grove with its green leaves and branches. The little poplars were slim and tender, and swayed rustling in the wind. Eventually he walked away, and turning to look from a distance he saw the old man, his back still hunched, pacing back and forth along the ditch with his spade over his shoulder as if looking for something, painstakingly nursing his little grove.

Leaving Gaomiaozi, they walked towards the floodplain. One's field of vision was very wide here; the natural scenery, villages and fields of the whole Huangshui River valley spread out before them.

This is a first-level terrace; see? he said, analyzing the topographical features for the girl. That place where the crops are growing over there is a second-level terrace; these terraces were both at one time or another the riverbed of the Huangshui. As the river comes down, it erodes the earth so that what was once the riverbed becomes a high terrace. Squinting her eyes, she gazed at the brilliantly green crops growing above. "It's hard to imagine," she said. "What are those crops? They're really tall." He told her it was a Mexican wheat variety. "What's hard to imagine is that all this used to be forest," he said, pointing to the barren low hills baking in the hot sun. "My lecture notes on physical geography and my texts on historical geography both said that the low hills of the Huangshui watershed were once covered with primeval forests." He paused and focused his attention on the silent hills stretching out before him. How still it is, he thought. So still it feels mysterious.

She took her photographic equipment off her shoulder and held it in her hands. He'll pass the graduate entrance exam for sure, she thought. "Hey, you'll pass that exam for sure," she said to him.

"Mm, that's just what I plan to do," he replied. "I've already reviewed quite a bit of material."

Yes, but that's not the reason you'll pass, she thought to herself. "Hey, look!" She stopped in her tracks, surprised by something. "Look, what's that?"

Looking, he saw a ditch filled with pieces of broken painted pottery. She bent down to pick up a broken jar. "How beautiful! Look at these designs!" she cried. "What a shame it's broken!"

The lower half of the pottery jar was missing; its round belly had been broken across a bold, zigzagging line painted on it. The pottery was at once graceful and sturdy, and was entirely covered with a thin orange glaze coating. Feeling the broken edge, he noted that the pottery had been fired evenly and to a considerable hardness. In

the middle of a circle covered with a net pattern painted on the belly of the jar, there was a grotesque human figure outlined in black. The figure's arms and feet moved in a dance that seemed to be performed for them, and its face, on which the features were indistinct, seemed to be frozen in a sort of silent, mysterious expression.

He stared for a long time at the unspeaking, enigmatic figure of the design.

"Look, here's a forest," she said, touching with her finger a row of black triangles rather like pine trees on the neck of the jar. "One next to the other, a row of pointy-topped pines. You were right; there must used to have been a forest here."

Stooping over, the two of them searched through the pile of broken pieces for the missing half of the jar. One after the other they fitted pieces neatly to the jagged edge, and gradually the jar regained its original shape. "Oh! This piece fits! This one too!" she exulted softly, completely spellbound by the ancient pottery jar.

Finally, only one piece they couldn't find was missing from the belly of the jar. The shiny, flowing lines of glaze ran from the neck of the jar to its base, and only the one black hole showed where a piece was missing. "Look how pretty it is," she murmured. "What a shame it's broken." How the world goes against us! she thought. Life is often also this imperfect. "What a shame it's broken," she repeated.

This painted pottery was four thousand years old. He remembered the archaeology class on the Neolithic era he had attended in the history department. Four large circles symmetrically arranged, a sawtooth pattern of triangles on the neck, like a forest. This was Machang type pottery of the Majiayao Culture, a very ancient primitive culture. He raised his head and looked at the tranquil Huangshui valley and the distant mountains. No wonder this world has such an air of mystery about it, he thought. The forests have changed into bare little hills; the riverbed has become a high tableland. The rain washed away the dirt around an ancient tomb on the hill, and then the pieces of pottery, following the ditch made by the rainwater, flowed out to become a river themselves. Knitting his brows, he chewed over this thought. It's true. These ancient pieces of pottery in the Huangshui watershed have become a river.

He found the little courtyard walled with rammed earth. A girl with a blue chequered headcloth was standing on the verandah adjacent to the northern room. The girl looked very strong, and she was holding a spade in her hand. "My grandpa — is gone." When asked, she said only this one sentence, then turned around and began

to sob. Old Gao is dead, he thought. But his trees have only been in the ground two years.

He walked to the broad riverbank and into the grove, which was surrounded by a stone wall. The silver-grey leaves trembled in the breeze while the roots soaked in the flowing water of the irrigation ditch. He noticed that the Huangshui followed an arc at this point, its muddy water rushing, washing against a group of boulders in the middle of the stream. You died, naturally and quietly. You never reaped the benefits of this grove of trees. The pottery pieces have become a river, but the poplars are still young and tender. You'd forgotten long ago that you ever spoke your feelings to a "youngster"; now you've gone and died, ever so quietly. I know you must be at peace, because my heart is at peace right now. And looking at this Huangshui River, I feel that although it is eroding the steep loess cliffs and beating against the rocks in midstream, it is filled with tranquillity.

When he'd worked in the production brigade by the Ertix River, he'd made the acquaintance of an elderly Kazakh woman. Having lost her husband when young, she'd brought up her only child, a boy, on her own. Later, when her son got married, she took care of the grandchildren. When he arrived at the brigade, he was a guest at the wedding of one of the old woman's grandsons, and later he saw this white-haired crone coddling a plump baby great-grandson. When she finally left this world, there was already a whole clan of relatives to see her off. He had followed the procession of horses across the plain with his eyes, watching the seasoned women and the tough, intrepid men.

He strolled along the Huangshui, observing the various topographical features in his field of vision. Oxbow lakes, the floodplain, dry streams and tributaries, waves beating against the shore. Raising his head, he recollected the shape of the terraces below the low hills on either side of the Huangshui, noting the various types of vegetation and soil along the riverbanks. As he moved step by step over the soft, wet earth, he felt his heart was at once heavy and peaceful. Then the girl in the blue chequered headcloth came after them to invite them for tea. Seeing her healthy, strong body, he couldn't help smiling.

He seated himself by the little square table on the verandah. On the table were a teapot, two cups, and a platter with four huge steamed buns on it. He saw her devouring one with relish, looking carefully at his movements all the while. The steamed buns were dotted with the same purplish red bits of rose petals. Taking a piece she had

broken off and proffered, he took big bites out of it. When he reached for the teapot, a stab of pain shot through the deltoid in his right arm. He winced, moved his arm a bit, and began silently to eat again.

Leaving the courtyard, they caught sight of a blue chequered headcloth flashing in the distant grove of poplars.

She awoke. The train, buffeted by blasts of air, was passing through a tunnel. I fell asleep, she thought, rubbing her eyes pleasantly. Leaning against the wall of this corridor by the car door, I slept more comfortably than I did on the couchette. She twisted her head around to see if he had fallen asleep too and caught sight of the glow of his cigarette.

"Hey, graduate student," she said. "Have you been awake all this time?"

"Mm," he answered. "I'm not sleepy."

"You've been smoking, then, all this time?" she asked. "Do cigarettes really keep you awake?"

Suddenly his face was brightly illuminated. The train was passing a small, well-lit station. She fell silent and let the snow-white shafts of light illumine and darken her little corner as they passed in swift succession. This little corner, she thought lazily, is just like a battle-field trench. Curling up our bodies, we rest awhile, waiting to attack at dawn. She thought of the train arriving in Beijing at daybreak, thought of developing her film, handing in her work and striving to get it published; this put her in a sombre mood. Brushing back the hair on her forehead, she drove away these troublesome thoughts. "Hey, graduate student," she asked, "what are you going to do when you get back to Beijing?"

He paused a bit, then said in a low voice, "I'm going to write a poem."

"A poem?" Her voice rose in surprise.

"I've been working on it for many days now, and I've written a number of beginnings. But they're all no good," he muttered, as if talking to himself. "But... I'm sure I'll finish it."

She understood. "Ah. I bet it's about rivers."

He didn't answer. Swimming in the Yellow River I already realized that this wasn't just river system topography, or just geography. This was a song, a symphony, a poem. I thought about it again by the Huangshui. Cultural geography is a branch of science; it has its own means and methods. But I need something in addition to science. River system topography is not concerned with how poplar trees grow;

works on geography, no matter how strong their descriptive powers, will never be able to express the mysterious caress of the waves of the Yellow River. And then there are those broken pottery pieces: A rainstorm washed away the walls of the ancient tomb on the terrace, the pottery in it was dashed to pieces, and then the pieces themselves, swept along in the stream, became a river.

"How about your academic plans? Are you still going to take that exam?" she asked.

"Of course. And not only will I pass it; I'm going to work hard at geographic research. But — I bet you'll agree with me — there's a lot more to rivers than that."

She nodded thoughtfully. She knew that the spirit of restlessness was once more upon this youth. We're both the same, she thought. Neither one of us is willing just to fritter life away. Aren't you the same? Every nerve taut, you carry your heavy photographic equipment over the land, searching for your hundredths of seconds. You work yourself bone-tired; you can fall asleep even resting on this hard wall by the train car door. You don't even have enough time to worry about your own life, do you?

She turned to face him. "By the Huangshui River I shot a still life. It was that pottery jar we put back together. It was a pity it was broken, like life itself," she said softly. "The background was that grove of poplars. I feel that this was one of my most successful pictures on this trip." There's another picture, too, she thought, one of a man hurling himself into a seething river. Those are the only two good pictures I've taken this time. "You know, the poplars have only just started growing, but sadly, the pot is broken . . . just like life." She shook her head dolefully.

He took from his lips his cigarette, which had gone out, and stared pointedly at the girl.

"Aren't you quite strong," he asked, "having seen so much by age twelve?"

She smiled wryly, her hands laced around her knees, waiting for him to strike a match and light his cigarette. "You men still have your cigarettes. When it's too cold or you're too lonely, you have them for a companion. But for us women, oh, those times are really hard."

He laughed. It seemed to her she could see his white teeth in the darkness. "What about your boyfriend?" he asked. "No — surely it's not possible you haven't found your handsome knight!" He'd begun teasing her.

"Please, don't bring it up. It was a disaster. We dated for three months — and then broke up," she said disgustedly.

"Why?" he asked.

She racked her brains for a metaphor. "You could put it like this: When I sat alone in a room with him, it was as if there were two women in the room. No — one woman, and one chattering old frump!"

He burst out laughing, and was soon near to splitting his sides. What's so amusing? she thought angrily. He's certainly got faith in himself. Are you so sure none of those qualities exist in you? I still haven't told you about the ones before that one: the egotist, the philistine, the block of wood — there was even a small-time hooligan. Angrily, she cut short his mirth: "Even in novels it says the macho man is extinct. Hadn't you heard?"

"Really?" He stopped laughing and looked at her. "I can introduce a few to you right now, all of them the genuine article. However, I'm afraid they wouldn't suit your taste." With a sneer he tossed away his cigarette butt.

"Go ahead! What're their names?"

"The Gadfly, Martin Eden, Pavel Korchagin, and..." And me, he thought. He smiled involuntarily. "There's another one, but the guy's name is very strange, and I don't recall it."

She sat silently, her eyes blank. "All of them are fictional!" she said.

"No," he countered, "they exist in real life, too. I'm afraid you might not recognize one if you saw him, though. Woman friend, I'm afraid you women don't recognize them."

They both fell silent. He felt his last sentence had somewhat spoiled the mood for both of them. Its whistle shrilling, the train was passing over an iron bridge. The door handle, the steel floor and the raven-black window were all rattling, and their shoulders were bouncing with the motion of the train. His last sentence had pained her; she thought of a combine operator she'd known when she worked in the Great Northern Wilderness on a farm. He was always laughing lightheartedly; in the golden fields of autumn he liked to wear a greasy old army jacket and play the harmonica all day. One day in the wheatfields during the noonday nap, when the sun of the plains beat down, causing the smell of wheatstraw to rise from the ground, she haughtily, contemptuously rejected him. Squinting her eyes, she surveyed the golden sea of wheat, her heart filled with indifference, even intolerance. The young combine operator, his feet crunching the stubble, went back to where the rest of his group was sitting, and for the rest of the noonday break she heard him playing a single,

monotonous tune on his harmonica. Later he went to the Daqing oil fields. "There are eight hundred thousand of us industrial workers here! We are creating a great miracle!" She heard another "educated youth" reading from one of his letters. "Come to Daqing! This is the only real life," he appealed warmly to his companions. Listening, it was as if she heard a warm and lively harmonica tune. Disappointed, she sat brooding for a long while as if she had lost something of value. Upon her return to Beijing she often thought of the cheerful young man, especially when she sat conversing mechanically with prospective husbands people had introduced to her. At those times it seemed to her she could hear the faint sound of a harmonica. Wearily, she leaned against the hard wall of the train car and closed her eyes.

Meanwhile, he was thinking of a girl — Haitao. It had been a long time since she had come to mind. In the patch of alfalfa by the Ertix River and in the dirty, desolate, isolated village with its crooked little mud dwellings, he and Haitao had passed many wonderful days. Not only was Haitao his first love; at that time she was to him like the flowing water of the Ertix, an accustomed feature of his life. His recollection of this affectionate girl remained as clear as ever. I wonder how you are today, Haitao. It may be you've already left that factory. Running together along the steep banks of the Ertix, we chased the masses of wildflowers as they were washed swiftly downstream by the flood season waters. We ran all the way to the swamp near Burqin town. To this day I remember the scene: The Ertix sliding lazily through its gravel floodplain, the reeds in the swamp growing in rows like folded screens. There were herds of cattle, and wild ducks and other waterbirds resting on a sandy island. The wildflowers which had been washed down from the foothills of the Altay Mountains formed a colourful floating layer atop the steely blue water. On that day the swamp and the wilds surrounding it were wrapped in a bluish mist; even the rolling waves were touched with an azure light. Only your cheeks were fresh and cherry-red, Haitao. He lightly struck another match and let his cigarette dangle from the corner of his mouth. I feel your bright red cheeks have been refreshing my heart all this long time, encouraging me to be warm-hearted.

He took a puff on his cigarette and moved his shoulders a bit. The muscle of his right arm was still aching. I'm afraid I did it when I hung on that rock on the eastern bank of the Yellow River with just this one arm, he thought to himself. I must have strained the muscle. How young I was back then; I could holler and shout even when casting fishnets in the icy water of the Ertix River, and I never strain-

ed a muscle. By now I've probably started to age, he thought. He stealthily moved his shoulder again, shooting a glance at the silhouette of the girl next to him.

This is quite a pretty girl, he thought. But Haitao was even prettier. When Haitao left the small village, not a single "educated youth" paid the slightest bit of attention to her. They all angrily blamed her; merely because she had been assigned a job in the hinterland, merely because of her future as a worker in a commune factory, they chose to betray love. But he could see another sort of expression in people's faces, one that showed they felt tricked, snubbed. It's true, he thought. Haitao was extremely beautiful, but she did excellent work, too. People found this sort of contradictory reality hard to accept. Actually, people were just angry that their own lot was unfair, but they felt Haitao had spurned them. He felt he had been the only one to act properly. He borrowed a horse and a light, two-wheeled cart from an old Kazakh villager, and opening the door to the earth dwelling where the female "educated youths" lived, he helped the beautiful girl, already abandoned by everyone else, to pack her things. Then he took her on the cart to the highway. On the road, when the cartwheel got stuck in some mud he jumped into the swamp to push the cart out of it with his shoulder. Then, holding the reins, he led the cart over the white, shifting sands, the cartwheels creaking. Finally they crossed the big bridge over the Ertix and arrived at the long-distance bus station in Burqin. But in the deserted door of the bus station, he coolly refused the snapshot of herself she proffered him.

You did right, buddy. Silently ruminating, he generously awarded his young self a perfect score. That wasn't what you'd planned to do originally; you'd thought of storming into her room and beating her up. You got drunk, and when you heard someone quietly mention Haitao's name you'd jumped up and rushed out without a sound, the empty liquor bottle in your hand, your throat burning. But then you grew ashamed; you felt you should have something of the real man about you. And what real man would go beat up a girl when drunk? With this in mind, you turned yourself around and headed for the riverside. Once there you watched the current flow steadily by. The Ertix, that's a river too, he thought, the only one in the country that flows into the Arctic Ocean. All the water running off the southern slopes of the Altay Mountains flows into it, and it connects many lakes and swamps, flowing purposefully towards the true north. That is a river trained to be free and easy by the Kazakh grasslands with their blazing sun and piercing frost, and those who have drunk of its milky waters have been subtly changed. He stubbed his cigarette out

on the steel floor and took another out of the pack. Looking back, it's clear that all your actions when you took leave of Haitao were because of the river; that wide and free stream remoulded you.

The lights outside the window began to be closer together. We're almost to Beijing, he thought. This train in the night is also like a river. You can't find the beginning or the end, the origin or the destination; you only feel a force hurtling you forward, leaving the lights on both banks far behind. This kind of river has no connection with river system topography and physical geography — that's why I want to write a poem. I want to describe this kind of river, the kind that flows from nature and the heart of man.

Suddenly a great clamour arose on the overcrowded train car, and passengers with all manner of luggage slung over their shoulders came crowding into the tiny passage, arguing and shouting. "Let's get our things together; we're almost to Beijing Station," he said, standing up.

People kept on crowding into the corridor. Shoulder-poles, cardboard boxes and large travel bags stuffed to bursting pitched to and fro before their eyes. They were pressed hard up against the car door, and now the snow-bright station lights, slightly tinged with purple, flashed past in rapid succession. She stared fixedly at his face and spoke not a word.

Up ahead appeared something like a sluice gate, straddling the tracks. He had the impression that the train was flowing straight towards this gate. "Ah, Beijing," he said quietly to himself.

3

He switched into high gear. First, gritting his teeth, he began to translate the introduction to Richthofen's *China*, which would be about three hundred thousand characters long when finished. Flipping through the dictionary, he thought, I'll hand in my translation when I register for the exam, and ask them to pass it on to the tutor concerned. He felt it would be good to provide a paper as well — even one would do — so he thought up a few prospective titles: "A General Description of the Physical Geography of the Shanxi-Shaanxi Gorge in the Middle Reaches of the Yellow River", "The Loess Terraces and Vegetation of the Huangshui River Valley", "On the Natural Resources and General Economy of the Ertix River Watershed".... But after writing a few lines, he discovered he was not writing a paper, but rather the kind of potboiler article one often saw in even-

ing papers or travel magazines. Hastily discarding these titles, he went over to Yan Lin's house. Yan Lin, sweating, was washing his son's dirty nappies. Old Yan stroked his beard while listening to his ideas for an article, then smiled and said not to bother with writing an article; he should just worry about doing well in the exam on basic material and there'd be no problem. But the old man himself wasn't looking for any graduate students to teach. So how did he know others would not hand in articles beforehand? I want to do an article anyway, he thought. I'm almost positive all the other candidates will write them; this is competition pure and simple, and no one will pass up such a golden opportunity. He borrowed a big armful of booklets and materials on geography, and began to study them at home. When he discovered that many of these papers were actually descriptive reports on investigative activities, he was wildly happy. So on-the-spot investigation in the field is a suitable topic for a paper! He thought it over. This is wonderful; not only have I made personal investigations, but I also have as a base all the meticulously compiled materials from the dialectal research. I can link the distribution and development of dialects with an analysis of the local physical geography. He decided to write an article titled "Investigations in Cultural Geography in the Huangshui River Watershed", but he did not take up his pen right away. First he read a large amount of materials, scowling in his effort to figure out just where among the lines and characters the cachet of the articles lay. He did not pay too much attention to content, but rather searched carefully for concepts and for evidence of the way scholars entered into and looked at questions. He knew that there must be certain principles behind this. The more he read, the surer he became of his own ability to write a good paper, because he could already dimly discern a train of thought with certain categories to which the specialists strictly adhered. This vaguely perceptible train of thought linked together strings of specialized terminology and concepts, forming them into a nerve, a fine net, a dignified and independent visual angle. He knew this must be geography. I've caught hold of you, he thought. Don't think to dazzle me with your highflown style. I've captured your essence. I'll seize you in a precise grip, then I'll devour you and digest you, and then, using the talismanic power of my dialectal research, I'll distil a potent brew in my alembic. My net and my visual angle can be independent and fresh, too. The books and theses he was able to read were mostly on aspects of physical geography and economic geography; the more he read, the more he discovered the sheer paucity of materials that combined the humanities and the sciences. This

filled him with hope for his own knowledge of Chinese dialectology and for the knowledge he had gained by auditing courses in archaeology, and he thought at intervals of his days at Xinjiang University and of the special kindness Mrs Qin had showed him.

At the same time he began his review of basic material. In addition to translating Richthofen, he did exercises from the back of *Easy Basic Japanese*. The exam will be entirely on basic material; I'm quite sure of that, he thought. It's always that way: The questions are quite simple, so when the examinees open up the test booklets they secretly rejoice. But lying behind those deceptively simple questions are cleverly concealed landmines and daggers in the dark. Eight or nine out of ten examinees may discover that they never truly mastered the simplest principles. He did the exercises again and again, and whenever he made a mistake he would pounce on it and memorize with a vengeance. He decided to do these few pages of exercises one hundred times, stopping only three days before the exam. With the section on politics he did the same; he bought two handbooks on philosophy and political economy from a used bookstore, and cutting them into phrases, he stuffed them into his right jacket pocket. When riding his bicycle, he'd keep his left hand on the bars, and with his right hand he'd pull out one of the paper strips, flash a glance at it, recite it in his mind, and then stuff it into his left jacket pocket. After he got past the busy markets to where there were no more traffic signals at the intersections, he'd pull out another strip from his right pocket. He rode very carefully; he never knocked down old ladies crossing the street or even aroused the ire of a policeman.

When he returned to Beijing this time, it was as a Beijinger. In the past ten years and more, although he had come back often, it was always for a visit with his family or for winter or summer vacation. The first time he saw his brother bring home a fashionable girl worker, he couldn't help but think: My younger brother's grown up. His brother was already the man about the house, and a black stubble showed on his upper lip. He could see that this silent young man was quietly preparing for the day he would get married. Little brother's grown up, and he's taken care of the household these many years; it's time for me to take some of the load on to my own shoulders. Their mother had been ill ever since she retired, and his brother said that in the past few years her stomach had given her trouble often. She spoke very little; he could discern her happiness only in the pair of eyes below her silver hair.

On the first day, when all three of them sat at the table for a meal, their mother somewhat abruptly seized a piece of chicken with her

chopsticks and put it in his bowl. Her movements were rather clumsy, and the weight of the chicken knocked over his bowl. Hurriedly she turned away to look for a cloth and nervously wiped up the broth which had spilled, avoiding his gaze. He felt his tearducts burning, and could almost not restrain himself from grasping his mother's thin, bony hands in his own.

He took upon himself his brother's task of buying vegetables, and discussed with him the prospect of building a small kitchen. Every morning at eleven he grabbed the vegetable basket and raced out like a streak of lightning to buy vegetables, handing them over to his mother to prepare lunch with. Thus, often in the morning he was only able to study for three hours, and gradually these three hours became more and more difficult to maintain. He tried to make good use of his time, but his brother often had his girlfriend over for dinner, and he thought at these times he should act like an elder brother, so often the afternoon hours were swallowed up in an alarmingly casual fashion. Only at night was it very quiet; his brother and the girlfriend would go out to "press the pavement", and his mother would insist there was nothing good on television. Taking firm hold of this precious evening time, he would lean over the small desk and attack his geography and foreign language texts.

He arose every morning at seven and went to bed at one thirty or two a.m. Usually he reviewed his materials till about midnight, and then pushing aside his geography journals, archaeology lecture notes and *Easy Basic Japanese*, he spread out a few sheets of paper and worked on his poem. The poem's title had leapt on to the paper immediately: "Rivers of the North". Grasping his pen firmly, he felt the great waves of the long rivers surging in his breast. The corners of the waves were sharp and clear and the waves were heavy as they slapped painfully against his chest, one after another. Over the thumping of his heart, he mustered his strength to distinguish the rivers from one another. In years past how many had he seen — the Yellow River, the Huangshui, the Bailong River, the Taohe, the Ertix and the Yili, even the Xilin River of Inner Mongolia and the Tongtian River of Qinghai. All these rivers rushed and churned together in the sea of his brain, making him so charged he felt a little dizzy. Having seen so many familiar faces and heard so many fascinating stories, he felt these rivers could combine to form a portrait of half of China, the broad and mysterious north. The wind was pure and the air refreshing in this boundless world; the weather was cruel, and the solid highways stretched straight into the distance. Greatly excit-

ed, he moved the tip of his pen towards the thin sheets of paper. Using simple, powerful language, he intended to nail those waves and rapids into the squares on the paper, and then, stretching his mental faculties to the utmost, to describe those simple, ordinary terraces, the sloping plateau and the high meadows at the foot of the mountains. But he couldn't write a single character; all that training in Chinese language that was supposed to have been sitting quietly at home in his stomach had vanished without a trace. He sat dully, anxiously staring at that title on the paper, listening to the thumping of his heart. It wasn't just a question of brilliant, earth-shaking turns of phrase escaping him — he couldn't even write a single character. Millions of impressions swarmed in his brain, but he didn't know how to deal with them. He sat there blankly until two a.m. then threw down his pen and fell into bed.

One night late, he suddenly had the feeling that it was too quiet around him. This silence made him restless and uneasy. Putting on some clothes, he pushed open the door to the outer room, and carefully making his way around the crowded furniture, the stove and the grain cabinet, he tiptoed to his mother's bedside and tucked the thin cotton quilt more closely around her. As he pulled it up to her shoulders, he suddenly realized she was staring silently at him in the dark.

"Ma," he said in a muted voice.

"You should get to bed," she answered softly.

He nodded. These past few days, with nightfall he had practically forgotten his mother's existence. He had never heard a sound from her side of the partition. Sitting on the edge of his mother's bed, he remained there silently for a long time, and then returning to his own room he turned out the light and climbed on to his bed.

Later that night he finally heard his mother's snores in the next room, but he himself couldn't get to sleep. Leaning on the headboard he smoked several cigarettes, absently listening to the soft sound of his mother's breathing. Then he quietly found his pen and paper and started writing in the dark, his pen making little scratching noises. Relying on the feeling in his fingertips, he knew that the lines of the poem he was writing would not become jumbled on the page.

These were the first lines of a new poem.

Led by the white-haired old woman, she entered his room. Look at this guy, she thought, amused, looking at his blank expression. He doesn't recognize me. "Don't you know me, graduate student?" she

asked, smiling. A fresh breeze came in through the open door and lightly stirred her black hair.

"I heard a piece of news that I thought I should come and tell you right away," she explained, accepting a cup of tea from him.

"I've heard there's a new regulation: If university graduates do not accept the jobs they are assigned, their status as university graduates is to be removed; moreover, for five years after graduation no state-owned work unit may hire them. As soon as I heard, I got worried," she said somewhat anxiously. "I was worried they might use this regulation against you."

Hearing this, he grew anxious as well. He hadn't considered this possibility. "Don't worry. As soon as I have my pass for admission to the exam in hand, there'll be no problem," he said. But his nerves stood on end, and his senses warned him sharply that troubles would not be few. He grew slightly incoherent. "It's right; I'm not really refusing my assignment. Hmph, I'm qualified to be an examinee. Never fear — I'm allowed to report to my unit as late as October first. Ha ha, but I'll have finished with the exam by the middle of August!" He rejoiced at his discovery of this time lapse. "If by some chance I haven't received my notice of enrolment by October first, then I can go there and put in an appearance. And then when the notice comes I'll be off like a shot. Hey, drink your tea!"

She smiled. He's so self-confident, she thought, sipping her tea. He doesn't even think what he'll do if he doesn't pass the exam. She sighed and felt a bit tired. Perhaps he's never run up against any walls. Observing his stupid air of self-assurance, she thought: How come he's such a child? Could it be that he doesn't know the first thing about society? Even in cases where it's quite clear no one's broken the rules, it's not that simple, I'm afraid. "I think perhaps you should make a little psychological preparation for the worst possible case," she said. They both fell silent. She could see he was at sixes and sevens.

He lifted his head. "Would you like to see my poem?"

Ah, so he really did write it. Looking at him pointedly, she accepted the few sheets of paper.

"I sat down quite a few times to work on it," he said, "but I've only written this beginning."

Seating herself more comfortably, she began to read the pages. There were only a few lines altogether. For politeness' sake, she sat and read aloud quietly to herself for quite a spell.

What a restless man, she thought. Having taken a step, he's off on the next without even having planted his foot firmly. She looked at

the crinkled paper. At the top, the young man had written the four words "Rivers of the North" in huge characters. "Um — is this all you've done?" she asked hesitantly, after a pause. This almost could not be called a poem, although she could feel a burning heat in the characters. He's too restless; those rivers have made him too wild, she thought. He has no idea that he's knocking recklessly at the gates of the palace of art. Graduate student, let me give you some frank advice! Even if you were as contented as a little fish in those rivers, this is Beijing, the capital. It may very well be that you don't know quite as much about Beijing as I do. Brushing back her hair as she lifted her head, she said:

"Graduate student, this poem of yours. . . . You should keep on working at it!" She noticed his expression had suddenly changed, and she felt a stab of remorse. "I don't mean, I don't mean that it's not well written," she explained earnestly. "What I mean is, the important thing for you now is to work on reviewing for your exam. Things are bound to be difficult; you should prepare yourself as well as possible. Your poem," she continued, starting to stutter a bit as she remembered his self-assurance and his enthusiasm, "um, your poem, you should realize that art —" She couldn't finish. She thought of her humid, stuffy darkroom. When I come out from that black cave, my body is as wet with sweat as if I had just been pulled out of the water. How can you know how many difficulties I have to endure before I can lift a passable print, soaking wet, out of the developer? And the luck of these hard-earned photos is hard to divine. Supported by your enthusiasm, you feel secure, but enthusiasm alone does not equal art. Sometimes art is cruel enough to freeze a body's heart.

"I get it," he said with a forced smile. "I know it too; this beginning is absolutely rotten."

"No!" she cried hastily, "That's not what I meant. I meant —" That's exactly what I meant. These few lines of his don't resemble a poem in the least. To tell the truth, this is nothing but a big pile of everyday speech; it's like a wild child standing on the riverbank shouting at the river. He's too unruly; he thinks he can succeed at anything, thinks just because he can whip up some emotion he can write poems as well. He really has grown up too easily, hasn't ever had the opportunity to truly taste life. She thought to herself, and almost said: Young man, art is not that easy to attain to! But at the same time, her heart was filled with compassion. Gazing at his unkempt hair, she said comfortingly, "First review your materials. You must first pass your exam to be a graduate student. Save this poem for the time being; I feel you wrote it very honestly. . . ."

"No, it's no good, I know," he answered as he flipped through the pages, making them rustle. "All of these beginnings should be torn up," he said quietly, and he tore the paper into long strips and then into bits.

This girl is right; I didn't write well. What an ass I am, he thought, somewhat discomfited. I found nothing like the brilliant language I sought. I never found those words and phrases like the waves of a river, heavy yet turbulent, ashine with many colours yet dimly translucent. I know the things I am bursting to say are all true. Biting his lip in frustration, he stood up and threw away the pieces of paper. My feelings are profound for the rivers of China's great north, for the air, water, earth and the folkways of that vast and unsullied world. I thought that as soon as an evening came when I was full of energy and my surroundings were quiet, all those things would come spilling out by themselves like a waterfall cascading on to the paper. But they didn't. They didn't spurt forth; rather, I squeezed them with all my might. And all I got by squeezing them was a bunch of dry, wrinkled, beggarly stuff.

Heaving a deep sigh, he determined to bring this subject to a close. "Just wait and see; I'll write it eventually." I haven't been to the Heilongjiang River yet. When I've made my investigations along the Heilongjiang I'll write it. He looked more carefully at the girl before him. "How have you been? Has everything been going all right?"

"Not really." She smiled. "I —"

Just then the sound of loud talking and laughter at the door cut short her speech. Three young bucks pushed open the door and, conversing animatedly, entered the small room. Hastily he stood up and poured tea while introducing the guests to her: Erbao, Yan Lin, Xu Huabei. Yan Lin had brought his son in his arms; after she had sat for a while, she relieved him by taking the plump child into her arms. There was quite a din in the room as they chattered away about the subject of reporting for job assignments and registering for examinations.

"Pal," said Yan Lin, peering at him from behind his glasses with a philosophical look, "You'd best report to your propaganda department. It would be unwise not to." Then, with a sudden change in tone, he growled threateningly, "Young man, are you spurning a Beijing residency permit? Each is worth more than a ton of gold!"

Erbao said, "Naah. What would you want to report for? I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll open a small wineshop — I'll quit my job so I can devote my time to it — and moreover," he said, scratching his head, "I'll contribute my tape recorder to the general weal, and

every day we'll play the songs we sang as 'educated youth' in Xinjiang."

Xu Huabei said approvingly, "Yes, that's what we'll do. We'll set up our wineshop at Shatan, at the gate to the Writers' Association compound. The 'Inn of Letters'. We'll tell stories to the writers, selling the stories with the liquor."

Erbao shouted, "Great! We'll sell our beer for one yuan the bottle!"

Yan Lin yawned. "So when do we open? It'd better be on a Saturday, when I don't have to pick up the kid."

Whereupon they all began to talk big: "I'll paint the adverts — fine wine and fine compositions — one yuan per bottle." "Erbao! You mustn't pinch wine, you rascal!" "Yan Lin, how about having your wife quit her job so we could have a cook?" "Don't bother with your graduate school exam; open a private academy at the wineshop and teach people how to cram for the exams!" "Hey! This wineshop of ours will take the city by storm!"

How interesting they are, these people, she thought as she hid listening in a corner. Beijing is a city of lively thinkers; who knows how many young people there are like these. She looked admiringly at them. But I've never been able to meet a group like this. She waved her hand in a gesture of irritation, as if waving away their cigarette smoke. No wonder he gave me such a feeling of freshness when we met by the Yellow River; all his friends are so lively, so straightforward and so stimulating.

She could not break into their conversation. Listening from the sidelines, although she was fascinated, she also felt faintly lonely. I've finished my task of visiting and photographing the Yellow River watershed, she thought, but the biggest headaches are still before me. She dreaded the prospect of manipulating all her personal connections, but she knew that to get anything published or to take part in a photography exhibition, to get those conceited, arrogant powers-that-be to nod their heads to anything, she would have to deal with various contacts. Sitting in the corner, she already felt as if a huge, icy hand had settled on her shoulder.

If I could have a group of friends like this, friends who would support me, how wonderful it would be, she thought absently. Only with the advent of dusk did she emerge from her musings and reluctantly follow the group of young men out of the door.

Not having had their fill of conversation, the group still jabbered away excitedly as they came out on to the lane, where the streetlamps

had just been lit. Hands stuck in his pockets, he was walking at the rear with Xu Huabei.

"How have you been, Huabei?" he asked.

"Middling. How can I compare with you?" Xu Huabei smiled. "You've got your university diploma, and now all you have to worry about is getting into graduate school."

He didn't answer. Stopping under a tree, he prepared to bid his guests good night.

"Hey — " Xu Huabei pointed at the girl with his chin — "she's gorgeous, pal." He noted a faint mockery in Xu Huabei's eyes.

"I met her on the road," he said.

"I am truly jealous." Xu Huabei made a little joke.

Quietly bidding Xu Huabei goodbye, he walked over and shook hands with the others. The lamplight filtered down through the trees, dappling his entire body. Suddenly he thought of the prospect of registering for the examination, and his mood grew heavy. Sticking his hands in his pockets, he walked slowly back towards home.

He worked harder. Because he was not very efficient, he had put off translating Richthofen's *China* for a long time, but the so-called thesis he had presumptuously written, as if he were some authority, had gone quite smoothly. On the afternoon of the day after he finished the paper, he took his draft to Yan Lin's father for a look. Sitting uneasily at one side, he watched as Yan Lin's father read the paper, squinting. Later, Yan Lin said that when he heard the old man say his name, his "face went green".

"I'll take care of handing this over to Professor Liu for you," the old man announced. "Professor Liu loves talent as he loves life itself; in spite of the fact that this article of yours has several quite... amusing spots, nevertheless" — and it sounded as if he were passing sentence — "you obviously belong to geography, this speciality of ours."

"Uncle Yan," he ventured timidly, "just where is the paper, um, amusing?"

The old man said, "Your description is quite accurate. Your idea of combining dialect with geographic analysis is unique. But you have obviously never been exposed to fourth-level geology; you're still quite a stranger to loess. Young man, do you really know what 'loess' means?"

He was too frightened to answer, although he did know about fourth-level loess, about "Malan loess", "Lishi loess" and other such concepts.

Old Yan chuckled. "It doesn't matter," he assured him, patting his

shoulder. "You're in cultural geography, not in loess topography. You were bold to make use of material from the humanities, and your idea was quite original. Moreover, Professor Liu originally studied anthropology at Oxford, so I reckon he'll take an interest in you."

But he was already not listening. Loess! His brain was spinning. Loess! I don't know the first thing I should about topography. I haven't grasped even such a basic thing as this. He knew from what he had previously learned about the Yellow and Huangshui Rivers that his own shortcomings in this area were serious. This led him to thoughts of the precious lesson he had gained once from taking an exam in a foreign language. You're sure to make a fool of yourself on that exam paper, pal, he chided himself. You're sure to blow yourself up in the minefield of basic concepts, writing a ream of beautiful language riddled with errors. His face was ashen, and only with an effort was he able to recover enough to be completely civil to the old man.

That same night he borrowed a large armful of books from Yan Lin's father: *The Accumulation of Loess in China*, edited by the Geography Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences; a book called *Loess*, which although published relatively early was a cornerstone of the field; and several dozen journals and collections of articles on geography and geology. As he rode home, he suddenly remembered some discussions of loess in Richthofen's *China* to which he had not paid attention before, and he decided to find those sections and read them carefully that very night. As he passed the intersection east of Shatan, he stopped to tie the books more firmly on his bike rack, and then stood in line to buy New Year's sweet dumplings to take home. When he paid, he realized with a start that of his entire savings, only a small amount was left. The Heilongjiang River, he thought; I don't know if this little group of guys in my wallet will be able to send me to the Heilongjiang. He determined to make a thorough calculation. As he straddled his bicycle again he felt ill at ease, almost premonitory. As he crossed the street he did not have full control over his handlebars — this was the first time he had run into anyone since returning to Beijing. A sleepy-looking "four-eyes" came hurtling into his embrace, and then proceeded to fall, together with his bike, to the pavement. He steered his handlebars sharply left and right a few times in an attempt to regain his balance, then kept himself from falling by planting one foot on the ground — and then realized immediately that this was a faulty reaction. I should have fallen pitifully to the ground, should have let him squash me beneath him, he thought as he watched the wrathful ap-

proach of a policeman. He didn't say a word; he could see from the policeman's expression that a single iota of argument would get his bicycle confiscated. As the policeman droned on, elongating every syllable in his enjoyment of this pastime, he stood respectfully in silence, first considering for a while the question of "loess", then switching to silent memorization of his vocabulary for the exam in political economy. "I'm fining you one yuan." As the policeman pulled out his citation book, with relief he pulled a "translucent great unity" out of his wallet, handed it over, and waited for his change. As soon as the policeman had handed him his nine yuan, he was off like a shot, turning in at the library of the Academy of Sciences.

In the open-stack reading room he consulted all sorts of encyclopaedias, skimming all the entries on loess topography and recording important points. But when he reached up to the topmost shelf for the Japanese *Hoikusha Modern Encyclopaedia*, a sharp pain suddenly shot through the tendon in his right arm, almost causing him to cry out. The fat volume fell heavily on his shoulder and then plunged to the floor. An old librarian in the corner stood up, and looking straight at him came striding over.

The book was unharmed. Kneeling on the ground, he scooped it up, dusting its leatherette binding with his sleeve while murmuring an apology to the librarian. The librarian looked at him carefully. "Are you not feeling well?" he asked with concern. He smiled with an effort, and cradling the book, he seated himself. As he was flipping through the encyclopaedia, an icy chill brushed his heart. My arm has turned traitor, he said to himself; I thought it had recovered long ago. I never thought you were so weak, ha, you coward, traitor. Grinding his teeth, he cursed silently. Trying his best to put this subject out of his mind, he focused his attention on the books before him. He perused volume after volume, the dictionaries and encyclopaedias passing through his hands like flowing water as he removed and replaced them. Reading along, he suddenly got the feeling that these books were also like a river. As soon as the closing bell sounded he headed home on his bike, looking neither to the right nor the left and maintaining a moderate speed, being especially careful of women and people with glasses riding near him.

The next day, his luck was even worse.

Early in the morning he rode over to the offices of the "A" Committee. The giant of cultural geography whom Yan Lin's father had mentioned, Professor Liu, was employed in a research institute under this committee. After locking his bike, he walked straight in through the main door.

"Hey, come back! Come back here!" A hand shot out of the window of the reception office. He quickly walked over to explain the purpose of his visit. Sitting behind the window was a corpulent woman with a face of steel. She listened coldly while he explained himself, then stretched out her hand to dial the telephone. He could only wait while the fat woman relayed his message to the office where he wanted to go, leaving out a lot of what he'd said. As she hung up the telephone with a "Ka-da", her face hardened: "The man at the Graduate Student Affairs Office said that all graduating university seniors are to register for the exam at their own universities and pick up their entrance passes there. They do not register individuals for the exam."

He felt as if a thunderclap had gone off just above his head. The woman turned her steely face away and started to knit, whereupon he hastily explained, "My case is exceptional; I'm...."

"No way! Exceptional cases, exceptional cases. Since when are there so many exceptional cases!" she said rudely. "No one wants to hear about your exceptional case!"

Swallowing his anger, he tried his utmost to use the refined tone of a graduate student: "Begging your pardon; I hate to take up your time," he said patiently. "My case is rather complicated; won't you please let me go in and explain it to the comrades in the Graduate Student Affairs Office? As soon as they hear the particulars, I'm sure they'll agree. I —"

The woman closed the window with a loud bang.

He advanced on the window in a rage and rapped sharply on it with his fist.

The window slid open again with a clatter, and a fat dark face contorted with rage roared at him, "Whaddya think you're doing? Are you crazy?"

Gnashing his teeth with fury, he said harshly, "Hey, let me ask you: Perhaps your husband hasn't beat you enough, and that's why you're so asinine?"

By now Black Ironface was in a frightful passion, her face quivering with anger. As she reached for the telephone he smiled ironically, then dashed out of the front door. She's calling Security for sure, he thought as he mounted his bike. Riding along, he was so enraged he trembled.

Suddenly in the extreme of his exasperation he got an idea. Stopping at a telephone booth, he found the number of the "A" Committee. Controlling himself with an effort, he calmed down and dialled the number. As the receiver was picked up at the other end,

he did his best to affect a Qinghai accent, drawling into the mouth-piece:

"Graduate Student Affairs Office? This is Xinjiang University. The examination entrance pass for one of our students was never sent. After investigation, we've discovered that his application was lost in the mails. Now it's almost time for the exam, and we'd like to send the student to Beijing to contact you in person and take the exam. Could you take care of him?"

There was a pause at the other end. His heart thumped audibly as his benumbed hand held the receiver in a desperate grip. Then the voice on the other end said:

"All right, but have him bring a letter from the personnel office of the political department of the school clearly explaining the situation."

Quickly he brought out his Qinghai accent once more: "Is there enough time? We musn't stand in the way of talent!"

The voice answered, "Mm, at any rate the registration isn't over yet. I suppose your telephone call will be enough — we'll make a note of it."

He hung up the phone, his body drenched in sweat. Thank goodness that "door tiger" doesn't control the telephone lines, he thought, panting heavily. That Qinghai accent was very well done — sounded just like a university department head.

He zoomed to the Telegraph Building on his bike and sent an urgent telegram to his mentor in the department of Chinese language at Xinjiang University, Mrs Qin, explaining his plight and requesting the teacher to send a letter of introduction that same day. It's in your hands, Mrs Qin! he thought. Mrs Qin was a very kind, warm-hearted woman; she would certainly not stand by and watch one of her students be bullied here in Beijing. She may even send it special delivery, he mused. That's right; she'll send it special delivery for sure, and at the same time she'll write a long letter stamped with an official chop to that "A" Committee.

The telegram cost fully nine yuan seventy. Sitting down on impulse on one of the leather couches at the Telegraph Building, he made a careful accounting of his finances. I still have ninety yuan ninety, he thought, just enough for a trip to Heilongjiang and back. I can stay away from guesthouses and hotels and just sleep in train stations and farmers' houses. I can hitchhike everywhere, and it would be best if I got a little temporary work on a boat or something during my trip.

Heilongjiang — when he thought of the name his spirit soared.

That is a great and spellbinding river, one created by the magical transformation of a black dragon into a mighty stream. If I make it to the Heilongjiang River, I will have seen all the great rivers which span the length and breadth of the north from Altay in the west to the Lesser Xing'an Range in the east. "From the Ertix — to the Heilongjiang!" No — "The Ertix flows away to the west, the Heilongjiang surges in the east!" Having composed these two lines, he shook his head and laughed. No good, pal; what kind of a poem is that? Leaving the Telegraph Building, he rode leisurely back home along broad Chang'an Boulevard. Casually pulling out a strip of paper from his right jacket pocket, he read aloud the political term on it and, neatly passing it to his other hand, stuck it in his left pocket and pulled out another strip. He whistled cheerfully, first the Kazakh love song "Beautiful Girl" and then the "Wusuli Boat Song". It's almost as if these strips of paper are flowing, one by one, from the Ertix River into the Heilongjiang, he thought. A smile stole over his face and joy welled up in his heart. As he rode past Beijing Station, a glance told him the big tower clock read ten o'clock exactly. As the bell tower slowly boomed out its tune, he whistled back with all his might. This day has only just begun, he thought, and it has been a very good day so far. When I get back I'll work on translating Richthofen. In five days I'll have my first translated draft, and I'll go to the Graduate Student Affairs Office to register. As soon as I receive my pass to the examination, I'll set off for Heilongjiang. I'll have to hurry, he thought, and I'll have to be careful with my money, too. I'll do my best to set out within a week, and press on to the Heilongjiang River.

At dinnertime the weather was oppressively hot, so he and his mother and brother carried the table outside and ate their noodles amid the shrilling of the cicadas. His mother had prepared a fragrant bowl of oil flavoured with prickly ash, and as he wolfed his food down noisily he broke out in a great sweat.

"Big brother, about our kitchen," his brother drawled, "the materials are just about all ready. And the labour will be no problem; I've got some close buddies who'll take care of that. They've all said that they'll come when I whistle. I'll borrow the tools from the factory. You don't have to feed them, they said — they want to help by working, not by eating our rice. Bricks, sand, hemp fibres, lumber, piping — they're just about all ready. Only two things are a problem: One, when we mix the cement we'll need a few bags of lime; two is the roof — we buy asphalt felt, or asbestos shingles? Asphalt

felt'd be cheaper; if we could find a way to buy some reduced-price stuff, thirty or forty would do the job."

He stopped chewing and set his chopsticks down slowly.

I've thought too much about myself, he thought. I'd forgotten my home lacked a kitchen, forgotten my mother had to sleep in that room stuffed with the pots and pans, dishes and stove. My heart has been filled with my examination pass and my planned wanderings along the distant Heilongjiang River. I'd forgotten that my brother has been quietly keeping the home fires burning, forgotten my family life. Putting down his bowl, he sat up straight and looked at his brother.

He remembered the secret feeling of disapproval he used to harbour of his brother's dislike for study. Looking at the muscular young man before him, he remembered the little boy who used to come to him when he had lost a fight. He had rushed at those hateful little "turf lords" and thrown himself upon them, while his little brother dashed in from the side like a brave little wolf cub to take part in the attack. Later he had left home, and once gone had stayed more than ten years. He only knew he had a younger brother at home, and that this brother was helping his mother take care of the household and make ends meet.

"Little brother," he said in a muted voice, "I'm much obliged to you for having taken care of the house and of our mother these many years. Now that I've come back, I should give you a chance to rest. I'll buy the materials for the new kitchen; I should contribute my share." Looking at the beaten-up shed in the courtyard, riddled with holes, he thought, bye-bye Heilongjiang. Flow on; I'll visit you someday.

His brother was still drawling: "That's OK. We'll each put in half — after all, we're brothers."

After dinner, he and his brother did some careful budgeting for the building of the kitchen, making detailed plans for necessary labour, materials and the number of days that would be required. As he handed over the money to his brother, he said, "Hey, little brother, tell her — to come and have dinner on Sunday." And then he added: "Tell her your big brother's inviting her."

His brother broke into a pleased smile. He's just like he used to be, he thought. In the past, whenever he'd helped his brother beat those snot-nosed heroes ever eager for conquest, he always used to smile in just the same way.

Returning to his room, he turned on the desk lamp and took up Richthofen's *China*. He translated very quickly, because his spirit had never been so focused and unruffled. The correct words leapt

from the tip of his pen one after another, and as he scratched them on to the paper, they formed a well-woven literary tapestry. He wrote on, his pen gliding over the paper, occasionally consulting the dictionary. He dimly perceived the clock ticking away beside him, but he did not feel this was the passage of time. The pain in his right shoulder grew constant, but his heart was numbed against it so that he felt the pain was unconnected to himself. He lost himself in the translation as he followed the German master of geography's abstruse and complex train of thought further and further. As he translated, he felt his own understanding of loess, geographic science in general and each of the great rivers of north China becoming clearer and clearer.

"You have a guest," his mother called from the door.

With an effort he pulled himself out of his studious trance. Moving his limbs a bit, he pushed open the door and entered the outer room.

A middle-aged man he didn't know pulled a letter from his vinyl briefcase and handed it over. As he ripped it open and unfolded it, the red characters "Personnel Office, Political Department, Xinjiang University" on the big chop at the bottom leapt out at him. "Mrs Qin —" he said softly.

The man said that when he had been buying a ticket at the airline office, Mrs Qin had approached him. He had noticed the bespectacled woman teacher hovering about him for some time. "She'd been staring at me," he said, heaving a long sigh. "Your teacher said that if she'd posted the letter, it never would have made the flight that afternoon, so she entreated me to bring it directly to your home after I got off the plane. She told me everything a thousand times," he said, sighing again, and then he stood up. "I agreed to do it, so here I am. Well, my task is finished; I'd best be off."

On the back of a postcard she had enclosed, Mrs Qin instructed him to tell her the results of his appointment at the Graduate Student Affairs Office immediately. If there were any more delays, she would get the university to send someone to negotiate. "I'm just afraid," Mrs Qin wrote in her elegant hand, "you're living on the run. Don't you feel a bit tired?"

Having sent off the trustworthy guest from the skies, he returned to his room and seated himself once more before his desk. The house was silent again. He took up the postcard Mrs Qin had sent him. On it was a picture of an ice-choked river: the Heilongjiang during the spring thaw. He affixed the postcard to the wall with a thumbtack, and then settled down and continued translating Richt-hofen's *China*. He worked solemnly along, his fountain pen tracing

stroke after stroke on the page. At twelve midnight he put away his dictionary and translation draft. Taking out a new pad of paper, he bent the desk lamp down a bit. Engrossed in his task, he wrote straight through until three o'clock. That night, he completed the first section of his poem.

4

She stood at the door of his house not knowing what to do. I wonder where that guy's run off to, she thought distractedly. Actually she could guess where he had gone; he was probably holed up in the library. Don't go look for him; all of his thoughts are with those rivers. Hesitantly she unlocked her bicycle, somehow suddenly feeling very tired.

"Hello." A pleasant male voice addressed her.

With an effort she focused on the speaker. Oh, it was — what was his name again? She smiled. "Hello," she answered. "He's — gone out."

"I'm Xu Huabei. Do you remember?"

She took his extended hand. "Sure. Aren't you the one from the 'Inn of Letters'?" she bantered.

Xu Huabei smiled. "That's right. I may even be the waiter."

This guy cuts quite a figure as well. Pushing their bikes, they walked away from the house together. A smile hovered about her lips. All of these guys are super, she thought. They're all tall, and energetic too. It was the afternoon rush hour, and the streets and boulevards were abustle with cars, bikes and people. She inquired about Xu Huabei's work and found out he was a secretary in a food company. "How about you? I hear you're a photographer —?" She nodded silently, then lifted her eyes to look at the streams of cars and bikes with a changed expression.

Today they sent back all the pictures and slides, she thought. Including those two best ones. They took no trouble about it, just stuck them in a plain brown envelope and sent them all back. No wonder Director Zhao's expression was so strange yesterday when I reported on my trip. There I was, so enthusiastic about it I was running off at the mouth — didn't even notice a thing. Today, a plain brown envelope — all sent back. She thought of the days following her return to Beijing. She'd had a constant stomach-ache and her whole body had felt weak, but she'd holed herself up all day in her darkroom nonetheless, searching for tone and composition, panting as

if she were locked in a steamer basket. She'd finished crafting her final products: several twelve-inch colour prints framed in fine white cardboard. But they hadn't used a single one; they'd sent them all back. I hadn't had the time to go to the doctor, she thought; I hadn't even cleaned up the darkroom, and that big plain brown envelope appeared on my desk. She squinted her eyes, shutting out the blinding summer sunlight, and pushed her bike slowly forward in an utterly rotten frame of mind.

"I dislike news photography," she heard Xu Huabei say. "I like artistic photography." Listen to the swagger in his tone, she thought. "Aaaartistic — photography." She shot a cold glance at him. That same morning, when she had gathered up her prints and slides without a sound, her jaw set, the tears had come rolling down of themselves. Then Lao Xie, whose desk was across from hers, had come over and said there was a travel magazine that urgently needed a photo of some scenery from the northwest; could she help him out? Unexpectedly, she managed to chat with Lao Xie awhile, but she did not dare look into his gentle eyes.

"I'm not terribly fond of photo exhibitions, but I do really like those black and white artistic photos." Xu Huabei had obviously not noticed her foul mood. Suddenly a wave of resentment swelled up in her heart. Art! What do you know about art? If you ask me, art is a thoroughly empty word. Don't lecture me, she thought, casting a mistrustful glance at Xu Huabei. You people understand everything; you'll put your two cents' worth in no matter what the subject. I hate people like you who try to fill every hole. I know more about photography than you do. Quickening her steps, she hurried to be first on to the crosswalk.

Xu Huabei was still talking. "The other day in the Huafang Studio at Beihai I saw a photo exhibition, and felt I had come in vain. It wasn't worth it at all." He spoke slowly and confidently.

Coming to a halt, she pulled out a plain brown envelope from her bag. "Could I trouble you to take a look at these, and to tell me which are the worst and which are less bad?" she said sardonically, fixing a scornful stare on this young man who so insensitively insisted on pontificating about photography. Surprised, Xu Huabei took the photos from her hands and began to flip through them. Experimentally, she also pulled out a photo of the Yellow River, the tone of which she had ruined in the darkroom. "Hey, look at this one: 'The Waters of the Yellow River Descend from Heaven'. How do you like it?" Her vivacity had returned; she was hoping to teach this know-it-all a lesson with a good, solid practical joke. What do you know about

liking or not liking photography? she thought. The photography in question is nothing but the shadow of a mental image I seized in my travail. I hope someday I can get the mental image itself down on paper, and then destroy all the cameras in the world. "This one isn't bad, eh? Look at the colour!" she effused.

But Xu Huabei pushed her hand aside and held up another photo, asking, "Who took this one?"

She was stupefied. As she stared blankly at Xu Huabei, she felt as if his deep black eyes were surveying her internal organs. The broken pottery jar, she muttered inwardly. He's really something, this guy. "Who knows who took it; it's just a dumb still life," she said. Undaunted, she measured up this little secretary from a food company, not believing that anyone could understand what was in this photo of hers. This plain, ordinary tableau had a completely hidden significance; only after people had heard the photographer was a master would they strain to assign all sorts of meanings to it, calling it a great discovery. You think you can see through my heart? Hunh!

Putting aside the other prints, Xu Huabei moved the still life into the shade. "The ancient, desolate loess plateau. A grove of trees whose lust for life is so strong it leaps out at one. And the peaceful pottery jar — what a shame it's broken." She listened to the deep tone of Xu Huabei's voice. He has a nice voice, she thought. Deep and smooth. They all have voices like that. "It's broken; an irreplaceable piece is missing. Mm, I feel it is precisely the life of our generation." Deep in thought, Xu Huabei chose his words carefully.

"It's not only us," she interposed cautiously. "That's the way life is."

Xu Huabei's glance flashed across her like lightning, and she turned away in confusion. She heard the food company secretary rebutting fiercely: "No, it's us! No one else's lives are as — shattered as ours!" Listening, she lost the desire to argue with him. It really is this way for us — she thought of what had happened that morning. Even if we grit our teeth and glue our lives together, they are shattered again. She lifted her head and looked trustingly at Xu Huabei. She found he was also big and strong and full of confidence, and that an aura of power surrounded him.

"Did you take it?" he asked, fixing his gaze on her.

She nodded slightly, and a wave of emotion swept through her heart.

"That's really something," he said earnestly, respect in his eyes. "Yellow, green, shattered designs; the plateau, the grove and the ancient artifact — ah, it may be that you're right after all: This ancient

jar should represent ancient life. Our generation may not be so special after all." He shook his head, subdued; she had nothing to say. The experiences of our generation are engraved on our own hearts, she thought; only we know their essence. Fingering the handlebars of her bike as she walked along, she felt as if she were communicating without words with this young man. Pushing their bikes, they walked, neither of them speaking anymore, while the streams of vehicles and pedestrians grew slightly thinner. They really are a wonderful group of guys, she thought. My meeting them is cause for celebration. It's just that people like you are hidden in the sea of humanity; looking for you is like looking for grains of gold in the sand. Suddenly something occurred to her that made her blush up to the roots of her hair. She cast a furtive glance at the young man beside her. Anyway, if you guys really do open up that 'Inn of Letters', I'll go there for sure every day, and I'll even drink that one-yuan-a-bottle beer you're going to sell.

"Have a look at this one." She pulled out *Son of the River*. As the sunlight glinted on the glossy print, she felt a flash of bright red colour in her hand.

Xu Huabei looked thoughtfully at the photo, carefully observing the boiling surface of the river and the half-naked man. She saw how minutely he was inspecting the picture; he probably hadn't let a single wave or patch of colour escape his attention. Finally he let out a ringing laugh: "Ha, ha! This is — him." Tilting her head slightly, she listened with great interest. "That's just the way he is: Throws himself completely into whatever he does." Then he said pensively, "Look — he's charging towards his goal again."

"I heard that you worked in the countryside together; is that so?" she asked.

"That's right, in Xinjiang. Later, we went our separate ways."

He fell silent.

Tucking the photo away, Xu Huabei asked casually, "This work is very good; why don't you get it published?"

She stopped and fixed her gaze on him. After a pause, she told him the whole story of the plain brown envelope and the rest of it.

A determined smile slowly appeared on Xu Huabei's face. "I understand. You don't have to explain this kind of thing," he said. "It's the same everywhere; they're trampling on us young people all over the place. But we're not that easily pushed around; we have teeth that bite, too." She saw a resolute, almost cruel expression appear on his face. This expression adorned his thin, angular face in such a way

as to make him look filled for an instant with the latent power of a sculpture.

"If they want a fight, then a fight they shall have!" he was saying. "We're not as easily pushed around as they think."

"Forget it!" she suddenly retorted hotly. "Who's going to listen to you? Look at me, one person; even if I work myself to death won't it still be just — " She clutched the brown envelope tightly.

"I'll help you do it." Xu Huabei spoke the words with iron decisiveness.

She realized suddenly how long she had been walking with Xu Huabei. Tucking away the photos, she prepared to say goodbye to this man she had encountered by chance. Swinging his leg over his bicycle, Xu Huabei suddenly smiled and pointed in back of him, asking, "Do you know where he went today?"

Of course she didn't know. But she could guess that he'd gone somewhere that had some relation to those rivers of his — if not the library, then some university.

"He went to see his future mentor," Xu Huabei told her. "I just remembered. Yan Lin's father gave his paper to an old specialist in geography named Liu. The professor wanted to talk to him, so he sent for him to come today."

She opened her eyes wide in pleased surprise. If this is the case, she thought, it means there's hope for his becoming a graduate student. This was a load off her mind. Let things go smoothly for all of us; let all of us succeed. She happily extended her hand to Xu Huabei in farewell.

He emerged from Professor Liu's compound, and leaning against a tree wiped the sweat from his forehead. His heart was filled with a joyful, almost holy feeling.

When he'd seen the old man half-sunk into the armchair, he'd understood: He'd arrived at a turning-point in his life. His body stiff, his breathing subdued, he sat across from the old man. Loess, he thought despairingly. He had no idea what kind of bad impression his loess had left on this star in the firmament of geography scholars. He thought of saying: I wrote that article before! Now I've already begun to study books on loess. But he did not dare open his mouth, just sat there stiffly, listening to the unhurried ticking of the wall clock.

"How many foreign languages do you know?" The old man posed the first question magisterially.

One and a half, he thought. But he said, "Two." His heart

began to thump. But don't test me right here, kind sir. I'm fine with the dictionary; my one and a half become two. I can work at night; I won't hold things up.

"How about learning another two?" The old man's second question took the form of a proposal. He nodded hastily. "English, French, German, Russian, Japanese: All of these are very important," the old man said. "After you begin your research, no one's going to be translating for you. You understand?"

He quietly moved his chair forward, hanging on every word. He felt himself getting nearer to the goal he had hurled himself toward for so long.

"I hear you've already been to quite a few rivers; is that so?"

Hearing the old man's third question, he livened up. "I lived for a time by the Ertix River; that's where I joined a production brigade for my work in the countryside. I've also been to the Yellow River and the Huangshui; I did some dialectal research along the latter." He was stammering, and he only barely kept himself from blurting out that he'd swum the Yellow River. "I'm planning to go have a look at some other rivers as well, or at least to investigate some of the rivers I've seen in the past; moreover, I want to investigate the Heilongjiang River." He stopped and waited for a sign from the old man. Heilongjiang, he thought. I won't make it to Heilongjiang; the money's already been used to buy asphalt felt for the roof of the kitchen.

Professor Liu closed his eyes and lay in the armchair for a long time without saying anything.

He became aware of the deep silence of the room; there was only the steady ticking of the wall clock's pendulum. After a while he looked at the old man uneasily, afraid he might already have fallen asleep.

"Cultural geography is a very difficult line of work." The old gentleman suddenly opened his mouth. "Young man, are you willing to devote the rest of your life to it?"

He gave a slight start. He wanted to speak, but couldn't.

Professor Liu's voice was very soft, but very clear: "No knowledge is useless, but it is difficult to find a branch of learning that can synthesize all useful knowledge. I feel that we need to train the sort of people who can make this sort of synthesis. I hope we can find people who, with geographic science as their foundation, can make a profound, but not exaggerated, synthesis of other branches of science and become truly visionary scientists. This is needed because while science has made great advances since it was split into branches, it is also suffering from fragmentation. Young man, this is not just some-

thing I am casually chatting about. You must steel yourself for an ordeal: Aside from studying physical geography, economic geography and historical geography, you will have to study anthropology and archaeology, and you will have to enter even further into the dialectology you studied in the past. You will have to gradually gain a grasp of statistics and planning. None of these will be easy...."

He listened, completely absorbed, and it occurred to him that this old man's train of thought was also like a mighty river. This is a white-haired old commander, he thought; commanders like this do not scare children with the word "loess". China really is a land of hidden dragons and sleeping tigers; tucked away in this little compound is a philosopher with an all-embracing world-view. Fantastic, he thought, looking at the old gentleman worshipfully. I'd love to acknowledge him as my mentor right now. I used to run from river to river thinking that would be enough to make me succeed, but now I see that a young man needs a mentor at the turning point in his life, a teacher who will direct his life with careful planning.

Finally Professor Liu waved his hand: "I read your paper. Mm — go back and prepare well; do well on the basic material. And remember: You must be among the best in every category."

He walked slowly along the shady lane, mulling over Professor Liu's words. I'm a lucky one, he thought, to be able to find such a good teacher. First I must pass the exam to be his graduate student. I must do well; I must even be among the best. Calculating, he thought, I still have a month's time. I've already translated the introduction to Richthofen's *China*. I've already reviewed the lessons from the geography department yet another time. In sum, I'm already doing some solid preparation. I must do well, must struggle to be among the best.

He mounted his bike and rode along the street. Stopping at the entrance to a pharmacy, he dismounted and bought a few rheumatic plasters. His shoulder now hurt whenever he moved it, but he didn't want to think about it. Pulling off half his shirt, he stuck a plaster on his right deltoid, and pulling his shirt back on, continued on his way. He despised that arm; he was stubbornly confident he could make it surrender soon. I have a strong heart muscle, he thought; my lung capacity is not bad either. My two legs and my left arm are all fine. My cerebrum needs only five or six hours of rest a day to be sharp and dependable forever. I will take full advantage of this month, he thought. He knew that since he had been able to put his time to such good use in the past, he would surely make efficient use of

the time left to him now. Fiercely pedalling his bike, he sped off towards the "A" Committee.

However, there was still no progress on the examination pass. The letter of introduction Mrs Qin had sent so miraculously that same day had apparently not solved the problem.

Last time, when he had brought the letter, the person in the Graduate Student Affairs Office had said, "We'll look into it." But today the result of their "research" was that because they had already finished all their work for the registration period, they could not register any more people. "Try it next year," the worker at the office said.

He was terrified. His voice trembled with anxiety, and a cold sweat drenched his shirt. One hour later, the worker expressed the Office's sympathy and understanding of his situation: They would take responsibility for informing the higher-ups of the situation, and the higher-ups would "look into it" further.

With a heavy heart he mounted his bike and rode home. The feeling of pure and holy fervour he had brought with him out of Professor Liu's quiet courtyard had vanished without a trace. His hands were trembling slightly, and he seemed to have problems keeping a grip on the handlebars. He forced himself to take deep breaths in an effort to calm the turbulence in his breast. I cannot do a thing, he thought blankly. Those people are hard as nails, and neither flattery nor abuse will have any effect on them. So this was the end they had planned for me all along, he thought: Stoppering the spring, drying up the river at its source. What can I do? What can I do? He had no ideas. As he passed the Telegraph Building, he stopped and sent Mrs Qin a last-ditch telegram.

As he passed a restaurant newly opened by "educated youth", his heart gave a jump. Immediately he changed direction and pedalled to Xu Huabei's house. He'd remembered that Xu Huabei's uncle worked at the "A" Committee — was, in fact, a leading cadre there. I'll ask Xu Huabei for some help, he thought; it's a small chance, but everything depends on it.

As he pushed open the door to Xu Huabei's flat, his watch read four p.m. exactly.

Xu Huabei was fiddling with a bunch of photos mounted on white cardboard. A glance revealed all those familiar scenes: the pottery jar, evening on the Yellow River. She's been here, he thought to himself suddenly. She's in with Xu Huabei. "Hey, Huabei, what're you doing?" he asked. His voice sounded terribly strange, he felt.

He saw Xu Huabei slowly straighten up, and then just as slowly

fix his gaze on him. He understood immediately. Oh, so that's the way it is, he thought; I get it.

"I'm writing a little article," Xu Huabei said quietly. "I know someone in the Photographers' Association, so I'm helping her by showing him a few of her works." He stared at Xu Huabei without saying anything. "She's in a bad spot; been really unlucky. I've got to help her out." He still didn't say anything, but flipped casually through the pile of photos on the table. It seems Xu Huabei knows what I'm thinking, so he only uses the word "her". Come off it, Huabei. I saw this act of yours when we were still in the mud dwellings in Altay. Back then, none of us even shaved yet. We never bought razor blades, and when we saw others shaving we thought what a nuisance it must be — back then, I'd already seen this act of yours. Haitao told me your story. Of course, now that we've left that place there's no reason to bring up past grievances; in Beijing people don't have to crowd together under a single skin coverlet in a mud dwelling, so there's no reason to speak of the past.

"I'm unlucky at the moment, too, Huabei," he said icily.

"You? Aren't you halfway to being a graduate student already? What's so unlucky about that?"

Quit it, Huabei. There's no need for you to be like that, each word full of enmity. Those stories about you remain by the Ertix River, and although we no longer measure ourselves and others by the standards that applied along that river, it still remembers all. That river puts great stock in promises and goodwill, and also in people's moral qualities.

"I had a disaster today," he said to Xu Huabei, his face lowered.

"What? Didn't you go offer incense before your mentor today?"

"I don't understand," he said somewhat heatedly, "what you mean by 'offering incense'."

"So you don't even understand 'offering incense'? Hunh!" Xu Huabei laughed challengingly. "'Offering incense' means going by the back door, taking a short cut, giving a gift to show your sincerity." Xu Huabei's expression grew cold. "'Offering incense' is not necessarily bad; if you don't do it, someone else will. We've been so oppressed we can barely take a breath; so what if we burn a little incense? Arson would be appropriate under the circumstances. What're you up to? Pretending you're a straight arrow? You're plenty lucky. You graduated from university, no problem, and you received an assignment back in Beijing. You've slithered your way gradually upward, and now it looks like you're set to be a graduate student.

You're plenty lucky, pal. You don't understand? If you don't, who does then? I bet you did a wonderful job 'offering incense' — it's all arranged from the inside; you don't even have to take the exam. If it weren't for Yan Lin's dad, could you have found your 'inside'?"

He listened to Xu Huabei vent his spleen. Gradually he calmed down. Huabei didn't used to get this angry when we lived by the Ertix River, and neither did he run off at the mouth so badly. He was so unassuming back then. He thought of the surging great river flowing towards the frontier. Hunh, the language people used there was of a completely different order. That river knew only zeal, will and promises. The land there knows only strong arms, big bowls of strong liquor and unbridled laughter. Huabei, how refined and modest you used to be back then! Back then you would have been incapable of saying anything like you just said, especially so crudely. Lifting up his head, he cut off Huabei's speech:

"Forget it — Huabei, tell me — have you taken a fancy to her?"

Xu Huabei gave a start, and then answered stubbornly, "That's right. I've fallen in love with her." He saw Xu Huabei stand up, fire in his eyes. "I'm not as lucky as you. I don't have a university diploma, and I have no way to sit the graduate exam. I've no way to do what I want to do; nothing good ever happens to me. I studied the piano from when I was six, and at eleven I was studying painting at the Children's Palace. I don't believe I'll never be an artist, but until now I haven't felt even a single artist's hair growing out of my head. Damn it, it wasn't enough that our house was ransacked several times by the Red Guards; they had to pack me off to Xinjiang to play about with spades and trowels, and once sent I ended up staying four or five years. If it hadn't been for my few years of soldiering, I would never even have been able to crawl back to this little nest today. I muddied my two feet there for nothing, and now I've only managed to get this miserable job as a secretary. What's more, I'm secretary to an idiot!" Xu Huabei waved his hand violently, and it landed on the keyboard of the piano, which sounded a horrible protest. "But I understand art! I understand her photography. She is as unlucky as I am right now. I can help her; I'm the only one who can help her. The first time I saw her I felt we were right for each other. We're both depending on this to pull ourselves out of our difficulty...." Xu Huabei's face had gone bright red, and he was pacing back and forth agitatedly.

"What's the matter? Do you have some objection?" Xu Huabei stared at him fiercely.

"No," he said simply. "It's not under my control." He sat down

and looked curiously at Xu Huabei. "Sit down, Huabei. What's with you today?"

Xu Huabei smiled awkwardly, and his voice returned to normal. "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me lately; I've been in a bad mood, easily excited."

He sat on a chair and watched Xu Huabei make tea for him. How amusing — look how gentle Xu Huabei suddenly is again. Now he seems to fit right in with the furnishings and atmosphere of this room. But he wasn't that way just now, he thought, and he was even more different from the Xu Huabei of the Ertix River production brigade days. When we were in our fourth year in the brigade, the wind was always blowing dust across the gravel floodplain near Burqin. When one walked near the white sand banks of the Ertix, one could often see grains of sand raining on to the surface of the river. Not long after the spring flood season, he saw Huabei hiding in the shelter of the steep riverbank crying. His tears left tracks of mud in little lines down his dirty face. He remembered how the day was turning to evening and the river water was sparkling in the westering light. I did not even think of laughing at you, Huabei. I hastily left the riverbank, afraid I might disturb you. I thought you were sitting having a good think over your career in the production brigade, but you weren't. You never went back to have a talk with that girl who went catatonic after you tossed her aside, and you never bid farewell to those sincere and forthright herdsmen. I don't know if you still remember how you once, in all seriousness, issued a statement of protest to the commune Party secretary because he had not organized a celebratory parade upon receiving Chairman Mao's newest directive. Of course, that was in our first year in the brigade, when we had not yet become so shabby and demoralized. It would have been wrong to laugh at you, Huabei; to laugh at you would have been to laugh at myself. But I was unable to approve of you when later you could quarrel with Erbao over a single cigarette, letting fly at him with the most potent curses. I disapproved even more of the way you chose to leave. One morning you said you were going to Burqin to do some shopping, and you never came back. You left your luggage, your fur robe and your beat-up old felt boots lying in a mess in the mud dwelling; you didn't even take our group photo with you. That was the only group photo we ever took; it was taken in the reed flats by the Ertix, and on the back were vows in our own handwriting to stick together through thick and thin. I know you left that mud dwelling cursing it, reviling it, but back then your voice was not so hardened, nor

were your eyes so fierce. As you walked toward Burqin with your back bent, I remember how your silhouette disappeared silently behind the white sand riverbank.

He sat ruminating, sipping the tea Huabei had brought him. The tea was very fragrant; a few jasmine petals floated on the surface. He gazed at the shiny black piano standing next to the wall; in the slanting rays of the sun it shone with an elegant brilliance. Suddenly he felt how strongly this environment negated his meditations. Those rivers are so distant, he thought; their principles have no sway here. Could it be that after returning here everyone silently agrees not to bring up the past and to put old wrongs behind them? To bring up those things here in Beijing is just to put yourself in people's bad graces; here life began anew long ago. Everyone is choosing a new life. Myself, Xu Huabei, Yan Lin, her — all of us are choosing new lives. She can figure out her relationship to Xu Huabei by herself; she's capable, having seen so much by age twelve. Of course it's not under my control, Huabei, and I certainly don't have any objection. But you must remember the lesson Haitao taught you; you must not forget that. This is exactly how you found Haitao back then. You were the same way; you cast your former girlfriend aside as soon as you met Haitao. Haitao let me read the poem you wrote for her; to be perfectly frank, that poem was fantastic. If that poem of yours were to appear in a newspaper or magazine it would certainly cause a sensation. Only I don't approve of your writing about the Ertix River. That river was raised on the fervent love-songs of the Kazakhs and the melted snows of the Altay Mountains, and it flows, ever surging, towards the Arctic Ocean. You shouldn't have written about it; the Ertix River is staunchly honest, and it honours promises.

Taking up his bookbag, he rose to leave.

"What was it you said wasn't going so well?" Xu Huabei asked casually.

This time Xu Huabei didn't say the word "unlucky", he thought, but just now he was a regular Beijinger, an "unlucky" in every sentence. Slinging his bookbag over his shoulder, he picked up the teacup on the table and drained it at one gulp. "It's the Graduate Student Affairs Office. There's a bit of trouble with them," he said, grasping the door handle. "They won't register me for the exam."

Xu Huabei smiled and patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Just hit the books and don't worry; there'll be no problem. Is that what you came for?" They were already on the stairwell landing. Xu Huabei continued: "I'll go pay a visit to my uncle. No problem; he'll talk to the leaders there."

He hesitated a bit, then raised his head and said to Xu Huabei, "No. There's no need."

That evening when he arrived home, he had not even parked his bike when a neighbour lady rushed up to him all a-gabble. "At last you're back, boy! Quick, take your mother to the hospital; quick, go in and take a look at her!" His face went as white as if someone had wiped a paintbrush across it, and his bicycle fell to the ground with a crash. He charged into the room and beheld his mother shaking with spasms of pain on the bed. With a violent start he rushed forward to take his mother in his arms.

His mother opened her eyes with a great effort and looked at him, then immediately twisted her face aside as another bolt of pain shot through her. The colour of her dishevelled white hair seemed especially glaring in the dark room.

He hurtled out of the courtyard. Standing at the public telephone were two girls in red trousers, both of them giggling into the phone. He put his hand down heavily on the cradle button. "Excuse me," he gasped, "my mother is sick; please let me call a taxi." Fingers trembling, he flipped through the directory looking for the number of a taxi stand. An unhurried voice answered. He blurted out his address — "No cars now!" growled the voice, and rang off. Throwing down the receiver in a fury, he rushed out of the telephone room. "Hey! You haven't paid! You haven't paid!" he heard a voice shouting after him, but he set his jaw and didn't look back. His brain had already lost the ability to reason.

Bursting into the house, he was struck dumb: His mother had already put on her clothes and was sitting against the wall, a scarf round her neck.

Walking nearer, he murmured bleakly, "Ma."

"The bicycle . . . my boy," she answered feebly, her eyes half closed.

Pushing the bike, he strode along. His mother sat on the back, grasping the rack without a sound. You are always this way, ma; you always take the pain without a single whimper, he thought. You may have fallen ill yesterday or even the day before, but you didn't tell us; you didn't even cry out at night. "We're almost to the hospital, ma," he said, bending over to comfort her. He could feel his left arm exerting tremendous force as it grasped the left handlebar firmly and steadily. With his right hand he supported his mother, gritting his teeth as he walked along the road. The stream of bicycles divided to flow around them swiftly, and the sound of bicycle bells behind him was deafening. Just let one person run into me, into my mother, he

thought fiercely, striding along. All his muscles were tense, and his nerves and heart were all at the ready. He knew that if some little creep hit his mother, his nerves and muscles would respond immediately to grab him and drag him off his bike. He knew he would lam into him with abandon, forgetting all else. He felt again he had become a wave surging angrily forward. Although he had been ashamed to let Professor Liu and Yan Lin's father see his wilder side, he didn't care anymore. There was a red light at the intersection, but he charged straight through it. As it passed under the bridge at Burqin, the Ertix River also rushed forward in precisely this stubborn manner. His heart was filled with grief and indignation. He saw the eyes of the policeman in his booth following him across the intersection from under their lids.

First in the emergency room, and later in the ward, he sat by his mother's side, sitting altogether four days and four nights. During those four days, he did not do his exercises in Japanese nor review the geography texts. He said not a word, only staring silently at the intravenous drip bottle at the head of his mother's bed. When he wasn't attending to his sick mother's needs, he would just sit on a white enamelled stool by the bed, sitting day and night, sitting straight through till dawn without moving. It seemed the pain in his right deltoid had taken roots and was hiding in a hollow under the muscle. He knew what sort of movement would cause it to hurt, and he knew how to avoid that movement when using his arm to handle things.

One morning a new nurse came on shift and for some reason shouted very loudly at his mother. He rose slowly, and walking over to the ill-tempered young woman stood facing her for a few seconds. Suddenly the young nurse gave a piercing cry of terror, turned and fled from the ward. After a while an older nurse appeared and set to work dexterously, looking at him strangely all the while.

He bought pile after pile of fruit and tinned food for his mother. Opening the tins and peeling the fruit, he held the food in front of his mother's mouth.

"I don't want any," his mother said, her voice weak.

Still holding the food, he looked wordlessly at his mother.

"No," she repeated.

He pushed the food closer.

"You have some too," his mother said.

"No. Have some, ma," he said.

"You have some too," she insisted.

Taking up an apple, he braced his thumbs against it and pried it in

half with a "ka-cha", then ate it in big bites, avoiding his mother's gaze and also the sight of her head of white hair. She began to eat a bit too, softly sipping the syrup from a tin of pears. Both of them ruminated on the distant past. When he was little — maybe when he was in the third year of primary school — he was in hospital with scarlet fever. Back then his mother, wearing a Lenin suit faded from many washings, had sat by his bed holding a tin of pears in much the same way. "You have some too, ma," he had peeped insistently in his little boy's voice. I seem to remember she wept as she fed me that time, he thought. Of course, I don't know how to cry anymore. He swallowed half the apple in a few bites, then started eating the other half. In the past ten and more years he had practically forgotten his own mother. When he had come back to Beijing for visits and vacations, he had sometimes even been cross with her if he was in a bad mood. But there was one time, he mused, remembering, one time when in the small post office in Burqin he had seen a Kazakh woman taking a long-distance telephone call from Beijing. The voice coming through the receiver could be heard clearly across the room: "Mama! Mama! What's wrong? Mama, speak to me!" But the sobbing Kazakh woman could not say a word. He stared blankly at the woman until the connection was cut. He would never forget the image of this woman, trembling as she gripped the receiver tightly and wept. Looking on, he had suddenly thought of his own mother. Ah, that day when I remembered my mother I almost went crazy with sadness. I rushed out of the post office and caught sight of the Ertix River stretched out before me. That day I experienced the depth of the anguish of us "educated youth". He chewed the apple forcefully, and the sweet-tart juice ran down his throat and into his belly.

For four days he did not study. From morning to evening, mother and son quietly bided time in the ward. His mother began quite quickly to recover.

He began to consider what should be his next step, and discovered he didn't have the least idea. Should he go to the Graduate Student Affairs Office? No; if he were to go there now, he might bollix things up beyond repair. To the library? The prospect definitely lacked appeal. Tomorrow his brother would be coming to take over watching their mother, and the house would be empty except for him, so he didn't feel like going home, either. Should he go look for his friends? Even if Yan Lin were free, his fat little son would certainly be clinging to him. Erbao was a worker at a brick kiln; every work day he sweated several quarts, and was asleep as soon as he got home. Thoughts of Xu Huabei led naturally to the girl, making him even

more unwilling to go find either of them. Ai, Heilongjiang! He thought again of that mysterious great river of the north, but there was no way he could make it there now. I must find a nearer river, he thought. Only by going to investigate a lively, spirited river can I recover my strength. Switching on the light at the head of his mother's bed, he took out his little atlas and flipped through it — and immediately spotted a great river in the suburbs of Beijing.

The Yongding River. He gazed at the twisting line of blue on the map. Go to the Yongding to have a look. As his mother snored softly, he gathered up his things, and resting his head wearily on the head of her bed, he closed his eyes.

Early in the morning on the fifth day, his younger brother arrived, girlfriend in tow, to take over. He picked up his bookbag and stood up laboriously. Pushing open the door, he walked outside and took a deep breath of fresh air. The early morning summer breeze spiritedly set the leaves on all the trees to dancing as he pushed his bike out of the shed and emerged from the hospital gate.

Just then he saw her running hurriedly towards him.

The broad boulevard leading to the western suburbs was thick with traffic. He saw her black hair blowing high in the morning breeze. He didn't feel like talking much to her, so he just concentrated on pedalling his bike. He had stated his refusal several times outside the hospital gate, but she had said she was free today and really would like to go with him. Here I am, running off to a river with her again. He thought of the Yellow River, and again of the Huangshui. This is already the third river, he thought; no simple feat. But he remembered Xu Huabei, and his mood was spoiled once again. He set his mind to pedalling again.

After they passed Wukesong, cycling west, the traffic and pedestrians began to thin out. "Graduate student! Hey! I'm talking to you!" She began chattering merrily.

"My photos are going to be published!" she shouted.

He nodded and kept on pedalling.

"That still life — " she was obviously very excited. "Do you remember? The coloured pottery jar."

He nodded again. He saw she was hunched forward, pedalling like crazy to keep up with him, and he reduced his speed a bit.

"Xu Huabei wrote an article for me to be published together with the works," she announced, still ebullient, lifting up a hand to wipe the sweat off her forehead.

"Congratulations," he answered. "What magazine are they going to appear in?"

"Hee! *Photographic Arts*! The biggest photography magazine in the country!"

"That's great," he said. Despite everything, he was happy for this girl. She's made it round a tough bend in the road, he thought; it can't have been easy.

"Hey, graduate student," she called softly, "you guys are really great."

They had entered an industrial zone. On both sides of the road tall chimneys belched black smoke, and crowds of people in work clothes spilled on to the road. Ringing their bicycle bells periodically, they dodged trucks shooting across their path or bearing down upon them and slow peasant carts pulled by plodding horses.

"Xu Huabei did a very good job on the article," she said, her voice full of gratitude. Tossing her black hair, she looked at him and said, "I read it several times."

"Yes," he said, "Huabei writes very well." He pedalled round a horsecart. Nevertheless, miss, those few pages you read were probably not one of Huabei's masterpieces. In Altay, Huabei wrote a love poem for Haitao. That poem would easily merit taking up an entire newspaper issue to publish. Even I was completely taken in by that poem, he thought, smiling in spite of himself. He tried hard to remember some lines from the poem, but he couldn't. Speaking from the heart, that really was one beautiful poem, he thought with true admiration; too bad Haitao in her rage tore it into tiny bits. Probably she could not countenance the deceit hiding behind the perfection; her face was red with anger for the other girl, who was completely in the dark. Then she had buried her face in his chest and wept. He smiled wryly and shook his head. That poem really was a great poem, he thought; the only thing I didn't approve of in it was that big section he wrote about the Ertix River. The Ertix River is mine.

Now they finally emerged from the industrial zone with its forest of smokestacks. Ahead of them appeared the high hills and flat plain of Sanjiadian.

The Yongding River. He gazed at the glinting, rippling ribbon of water. So this is the Yongding River, he thought. Suddenly he felt tired; his entire right arm ached and felt numb all at once. Anyway, he thought, I have made it to the banks of another river of the north. "Hey! Be careful!" he shouted at her, gripping his handlebars forcefully. His bike was flying along, pointing straight down the grade towards the river valley. Quickly turning round his head to glance

at her, he saw a pair of obstinate black eyes meet his from under a flying cloud of black hair.

She had released her brakes in a devil-may-care fashion and was racing down the steep hill. This guy is brave and fierce, she thought, just like a wild animal racing down a hill, or a free-falling waterfall. He is more zealous and braver than Xu Huabei, but Xu Huabei really knows more how to support and assist a woman in difficulty; Huabei is more resourceful and better at striving. Xu Huabei is not like this one, careless of the consequences of his actions; moreover, Xu Huabei is engaged in a valiant struggle against his fate. She thought of the plan Xu Huabei had outlined: He would clear away the brambles and obstacles with his pen and leave his factory secretary's desk. Even more importantly, she suddenly thought of the Russian song "The Hawthorn Tree". Xu Huabei has already announced his love for me. As she reflected, she looked at him biking ahead of her. But I trust you even more, you hot-headed young man, she said softly; I want to have your opinion before I decide. She pressed hard on the pedals a few times, and the bicycle shot forward like an arrow. She also saw the Yongding River, saw how it emerged from among the far-off peaks of the Western Hills and came flowing towards them. She saw the lofty, solid dam at Sanjiadian. She loosened the button on her collar as she gazed at the outstretched, untrammelled plain of the river's lower reaches. She felt the cool wind unique to this valley, laden with a heavy scent of earth, caressing her bosom. Pedalling with all her might, she soon caught up with him. Wordlessly they flew down the road straight into the valley, shoulder to shoulder.

Laying their bikes down on the beach, they walked towards the water.

Hm . . . so you are the Yongding River, he thought. You are the same river that carved a long, deep canyon in the towering ranges of hills northwest of Beijing. You are the same river that one day came to Sanjiadian, one day broke free from the constraints of the hills and boulders and came plunging recklessly down to crisscross the broad plain. You are the same river that has been free and willful for years beyond count, changing your course often, leaving a tangle of riverbeds behind you. Taken aback, he stared wide-eyed at the tiny ripples on the surface of the flowing water. It's pitiful, he thought, pacing back and forth on the bank. Ai, this river is really pitiful. He looked uncomprehendingly at the fish-scale-sized corrugations on the surface of the water as the tiny, clear wavelets of the Yongding River lapped monotonously on the grey shore.

They walked along the barren banks of the river, chatting. Every

now and then she would pause and study the tableau and colours of the river valley. Head down, he was carefully reading the manuscript of Xu Huabei's article.

Flipping the pages one by one, he read through the article quite quickly. The paper was pure art; in it, Xu Huabei analyzed the ancient, unsophisticated plateau, the new growth of trees and the broken pottery jar; the composition, lighting, colour and tone. The article tersely yet fully examined the symbolism of the still life, bringing together the sweep of history and the hardship of life, affirming in the tragic content of the work the photographer's enduring love for truth, excellence and beauty. That's how Huabei writes, he thought, folding the manuscript: fluently and beautifully. He turned to her and asked, "Is Huabei working today?" Today is Sunday, he thought; according to reason, Huabei should have found a way to spend the day with her.

"He went to talk to some bureaucrat about your problem," she answered. "Huabei said that if the problem of your registration for the examination could be taken care of, you'd probably be off the hook."

Tramping over the shingle and larger rocks on the beach, he secretly stifled his anger. He deplored the things that had happened between himself and Xu Huabei; the more he thought about them, the more vulgar they seemed. It was just like his personal aversion to Huabei: an intuition, an unexplainable one, but one in which he nonetheless firmly believed. He felt an indescribable barrier between himself and the girl. As he mused, a sudden, powerful memory of that world of cruelly hot weather and barren landscape came to him. Huabei, you were wrong, he said in his heart. I have no relationship with this girl. You don't have to be so thorough. If she likes you — no, even if back then Haitao had liked that long poem of yours, I wouldn't have said a thing. There is no need for the sort of words that have passed between us. In Ertix, it was like we were naked under the sun that baked the earth; back then we never explained anything, neither to others nor to ourselves. Quickening his steps, he resolved not to think about Huabei anymore. Instead, he concentrated on the geographic features of the Yongding River valley.

Xu Huabei declared his love for me last night, she thought as she walked. The words he spoke practically . . . practically burned me. But somehow I suddenly thought of you. She cast a glance at him there by her side. In my eyes, you once became the figure of a man sprinting towards a powerful, turbulent river, a sort of spirit, a son of the river. Huabei . . . of course, Huabei is very fine as well. He understands a struggling woman so thoroughly, and in helping me he

was discerning, decisive and resourceful. He was a staff supporting me on my muddy journey. Her musings led her again to memories of "The Hawthorn Tree", and her heart was filled with a tangle of contradictory emotions, among which was delight at her embarrassment of riches.

"Ai, you're all good people," she said softly.

He was listening to the clatter of the round rocks beneath his feet, his mood growing worse and worse. The Yongding River had no soul-stirring scenery with which to shake him, so thoughts of registration for the exam wrapped themselves around his brain, troubling him. The small river before him trickled on, patiently, tenaciously. He stared at the water and sighed deeply. Are you the Yongding River? Are you the one who carved an opening in the Yanshan Hills and the Western Hills, and who have for years changed course at will, your waves a-raging? In *Surface Water* and *Historical Physical Geography* you were described as an unruly river never at rest, changing course again and again. When I read those books, I couldn't help imagining what you must look like. I have no way of guessing what you were like in your younger years, no way of knowing just how strong you were then. In the books it said that more than five hundred years ago you forced the abandonment of two cities, and that in the last three hundred years you forced people in your lower reaches to build new dikes five times. He stared vacantly at the river water. One could almost leap across this little creek at one bound, or as the classical saying went, "lift one's robe and wade across". He watched the clear current glide sluggishly along while a few decayed leaves floating on the surface of the river kept pace with his slow stroll.

He thought of the scenery of the Yellow River. Now that's a real river, he thought; I saw a whole great tree trunk rolled and tossed in its muddy waves. There a real man can obtain a rough sort of consolation; there, the great river stretching off into the obscure distance excites a man's bravery and tempts him to divulge the secrets of his inmost heart to a woman. But I won't be telling them to you again, you women, he thought grimly. Those heavily weighted words become something else entirely in your fragile hearts. With long strides he crunched along the shingle biting his lips; he had already left the girl behind. As soon as the Yongding River reached the plain it surrendered. You, you've also surrendered. You're irritable, you're aggravated, you paid no attention to anyone for four days; on the street and in the hospital you were spoiling for a fight. You didn't study — *you didn't even look at a single book!* He scoffed at himself: Just because you didn't get your pass to the examination, just because you

didn't have enough money to go to Heilongjiang, just because Xu Huabei was after this girl, you lost your determination. He fixed a scornful eye on the tiny river. "Hey, I thought you were a real man," he said loudly to the Yongding River.

The water flowed on silently as before, tiny ripples covering its surface. Bending down, he picked up a rock and threw it hard towards the river. It turned over a few times in the air, hurtled towards its own blurred image, hit the water with a "gu-dong" and sank. Hey, it sank with only a "gu-dong", he thought; didn't even make a splash. Somewhat surprised, he bent down to pick up a bigger rock. Suddenly a pain shot through his right arm as if it had been torn open. He grimaced and drew in a cold breath. This illness has already taken roots, he thought; this arm is finished. He rushed forward angrily a few steps. "Traitorous bastard!" he cursed, recklessly throwing the rock towards the river. Tumbling over clumsily a few times, the rock hit a pile of shingle next to the water's edge and shattered. "Coward! Hunh! I'm not afraid of you," he muttered, standing desolately on the shore, panting.

"What's wrong, graduate student?" she asked, running up.

"Nothing. Hey, let's find a place to have lunch," he said.

They found a small foodstore and bought two packs of biscuits. Passing through a vegetable garden, they bought a pile of tomatoes, and then found a big tree and sat down in its shade. The world visible outside the patch of shade was roasting in the blazing noonday sun, and a blinding white sheet of simmering heat enveloped the river valley.

"Hey, graduate student," she asked, munching on a biscuit, "written any more poems lately?"

His mouth was full of biscuit. Lifting his head, he looked at her uncomprehendingly.

She wiped a tomato clean with her handkerchief and passed it to him.

"Haven't you already written a beginning for it? That poem," she asked.

He hesitated a bit, but finally answered, "That poem, yes, I've already written two sections."

She cried happily, "Two sections! That's really fast! I remember that day you were still working on the beginning." Maybe he really will succeed, she thought.

"In the past few days, in the hospital, I wrote a bit more. Anyway, two sections are finished," he said. But they were not written half

as well as I wanted them to be; they were written in confusion, he thought, and his mood darkened.

She stretched out her hand and stared at him excitedly. "Come on! Give me a look!"

He didn't answer. He thought of Xu Huabei's article and of the love poem Huabei had written for Haitao. He felt rather indifferent; he had no desire to sit here and discuss his own poem with her. He was silent for a while, and then lifting up his head, he said, "No, that's impossible at the moment. That poem is like a dry stick. After I revise it I'll ask you to read it."

He stood up and swallowed the last half tomato. "I want to take a walk along the river. You," and he looked at her thin face, "how about resting here for a while?"

She thought of struggling up from the ground, but suddenly her whole body felt soft and weak. She glanced at the blinding white sun-baked earth beyond the shade. "Ai," she sighed, "I think I will have a rest. These days I've been too busy to get to sleep before midnight — I'll be waiting for you, graduate student." She smiled at him tiredly. "Come back soon."

He strode along the shore of the Yongding River. She watched him enter the poisonous glare of the sunlight, walk into a grove of willows and disappear.

After skirting the woods, he followed the curve of the river and came to a new place where the river valley abruptly opened up. Below Sanjiadian was a boundless plain across which a high dike stretched to the horizon. The riverbed contained by the dike was deep and broad, lined with iron-grey shingle. It's a gravel floodplain, he thought. This riverbed has a gravel floodplain straight out of the south of Altay. An expanse of clear water twisted its way across this dry, thirsty gravel floodplain, strongly reflecting the white sunlight. Screwing up his eyes, he shaded his brows with his hand and looked at the floodplain on the opposite bank. How broad it is, he thought, surprised inwardly. It's so broad you practically can't see the other side. He turned and ran up on to the dike to continue his survey of the broad riverbed, and a scene of grey met his vision. How incredibly broad, he thought again, stupefied. This floodplain must be several kilometres wide, maybe even ten. On this fertile plain the river has created a gobi, a desert, a cradle several kilometres, even ten kilometres, wide. In the midst of the fields and woods it has created a sheet of unreclaimable iron-grey, and still it flows silently on.

Sitting in a row on the dike were some naked children, burned black by the sun from head to toe. Suddenly he realized the little boys were

all looking at him curiously. Picking up a rock, he hurled it towards the middle of the river, where it fell swiftly and hit the water with a "plonk". "It's deep," he said. "Very deep." He picked up another rock and threw it. The bunch of little mud-skipper sitting on the dike all jumped up and crowded around him shouting, then each scrambled to pick up round, goose-egg stones and jagged pebbles and throw them into the river one after the other. An unceasing stream of "gu-dong, gu-dongs" came from the river. Then the carefree little striplings all ran yelling to the river and jumped in, making a great deal of splashing. He stood by the river and listened to their happy cries and the sound of the water, while his face and body were wet by the flying drops of water.

So the Yongding River has not surrendered, he thought; this is not a shallow, humiliated, obedient brook. The sound the water made when the rocks hit it just now had in it deep perseverance and power. The Yongding River has not surrendered; it is not like you. How could you ever compare with these rivers of the north? You're just like those verses of yours: dried-up, frivolous. Only when things are going right are you filled with confidence, supremely complacent. Scenes of himself in the past few days flashed through his mind: the examination pass, the hospital, Xu Huabei and the girl. "Stupid clod, you're worthless!" he cursed himself. You must be a bit more grave, like this river suffering through a season of drought. You must be calm, reserved, tolerant. You should, like these suntanned children on the riverbank, be bursting with vitality, at home in the bosom of nature. You should climb like a vine up tall mountains through ancient forests, sipping springwater and rainwater; and when the bugle sounds, just like this river, with angry waves like bolts of thunder you will rush down, letting the all-destroying floodwaters cover this grey gravel floodplain and letting your cry reverberate throughout the canyon and over the plain.

He returned along the beach. The Yongding River continued to flow slowly off into the distance. Gazing at the spacious valley and the narrow flow of water, a feeling of strangeness and mystery came over him. When he arrived back at the big tree behind the woods, the westering sun had already sunk into a bank of long, thin clouds.

He came to a stop under the tree: The girl was fast asleep against the tree-trunk. He sat down quietly and looked at her sleeping form, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. Sitting there to one side and looking at her, he felt a hundred different emotions meet in his heart.

You're much too tired, twelve-year-old girl. This sort of life is really too difficult for you. As he puffed on his cigarette and eyed

her slumbering figure, his heart began to pound violently. All that had happened from the time he had met this girl onward appeared in his mind's eye: the waves of the Yellow River, the Huangshui and this Yongding River all flashed past. No matter what else, he thought, experiences like these are hard to come by. He knew that the girl asleep before him was truly a good woman. Am I ever going to meet anyone better than she is? he asked himself silently. Suddenly coldness gripped his heart. Contemplating this heavy mood that seemed to come from afar, he chain-lit another cigarette. Perhaps I should stretch out my hand and grasp her firmly; maybe I should not hesitate to hand Huabei a defeat. Who knows whether one's own life will end in tragedy? he asked himself grimly. He gazed long at her sleeping there as if he wished to imprint the memory forever on his heart. No, this is not the love I have so earnestly hoped for. He shook his head imperceptibly. I must gather my courage and forge ahead; even if tragedy befalls me I shall never surrender. Moreover, she has only just reached a peak in her career, and her heart is filled with the joy of success; let her come to know and understand everything on her own. I should distance myself from her a bit. She met Huabei in the midst of struggle, he thought. As Okabayashi Nobuyasu said in his song, "I am me; I cannot become you." He took a deep drag on the cigarette, then blew the smoke towards the valley. Run on ahead, he thought; don't look back. I wish you success, and I wish you happiness. If you ever find yourself in difficulty, if one day Huabei should ever make you feel the way he made that girl feel in Altay, I will stretch out my hand and do my best to help you, even though my right arm is already injured. But now — he lightly ground his cigarette into the ground with his foot — now I must bid you farewell.

He turned and gazed at the entirety of the Yongding River's scenery, remembering facts from his geography books. When the first breath of evening wind blew from the hills west of Sanjiadian, he awakened her. Pushing their bikes, they walked to the top of the steep hill, and joining the highway going east, they rushed towards the city. The dusky water of the Yongding remained behind them, flashing and dancing in the yellow rays of the westering sun.

5

He ascended the staircase floor by floor, turned the corner, and walked down the broad corridor. Asking a middle-aged man the way to

the office of the first Party secretary of the "A" Committee, he continued on his way until he came to a frosted glass door, which he pushed open without hesitation. Behind a huge desk crouched a grey-haired old man. With a flash he thought of Professor Liu and his own mother. Surprised, the old man put on his spectacles and stared at him.

"Are you the Party Committee Secretary, sir?" he asked.

"That's right. My name's Cao."

He sensed irritation in the secretary's tone. Taking out his diploma, the application form he had gotten back from the Graduate Student Affairs Office, the letter of introduction from Mrs Qin and an application for admission to graduate study in the speciality of cultural geography he had filled out himself as well as a dated memorandum, he laid the documents carefully one by one on the secretary's desk. Finally, taking one step backward, he clearly and concisely explained his whole situation to the secretary.

"Now there are ten days left until the exam, including today. My mother and I have done everything in our power," he said evenly, levelling his eyes at the secretary and leaving no room for doubt, "but it has been of no use. I have come to see you directly as a last resort. Please inform the Graduate Student Affairs Office that they should immediately register me for the exam."

Secretary Cao set down his glasses and mulled over what to say. "Young man, don't you feel, mm —" he smiled faintly — "This is the office of the Party secretary; you think you can just charge in here without even knocking?"

He met Secretary Cao's gaze without blinking: "I don't agree. This work is given to you by the people to carry out. Moreover," he continued icily, "I started knocking at the reception office downstairs, and I've been knocking for more than a month. You might try disguising yourself and going to your own reception office to call on yourself," he recommended.

Secretary Cao was amused by this. "Ha, so you think your examination is really this important? Come, have a seat. Young man," the secretary began, lighting a cigarette and eyeing this young student, "do you think that my other work, ahem —" he poked at a pile of documents on the desk with his finger — "We old men are busy all day; isn't this precisely the people's work you were talking about?"

"You can be a bit busier," he replied in steely tones. "Aren't you a member of the Communist Party?" He saw the secretary jump at this last.

There was a strained silence. Finally, the secretary extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray, lifted his head and said:

"All right, I'll have a look at your materials right away, OK? If you are eligible according to the registration requirements, I'll tell them to issue you a pass for the examination."

"I must apologize to you now, Secretary Cao." He remained sitting. "Just now the things I said to you were impolite," he said, looking earnestly at the secretary, "because I really had no alternative. You know, there are only ten days left."

Cao rose and said warmly. "No, everything you said was quite correct." He was escorted by the aged secretary out of the glass door and all the way to the stairwell. "But, young man," the secretary asked with interest as he was bidding him goodbye, "what if we decide not to give you the examination pass? I mean, after careful deliberation?"

"Then I'll gate-crash the examination," he said, dead serious.

"Oh. Well then, what if, by one chance in ten thousand, you don't pass the exam? Won't you feel that the things you've said today were a bit presumptuous?" the secretary inquired, smiling.

"That's impossible. I must pass." He sounded like a wounded beast; there was a growl in his throat.

"You certainly are self-confident." The secretary shook his head, then suddenly changed the subject and asked gravely, "Are you really so enamoured of this speciality?"

"Goodbye — " he said in a strangled voice, running down the staircase without looking back.

He ran into the main door, pushing it open, and mounting his bike quickly, he joined the ceaseless stream of humanity on the street. His heart was thumping wildly, and he tried desperately not to think about his conversation with the secretary. If you'd kept on talking you would have been unable to restrain yourself; you would have let flow humiliating tears, or undone all your good work by getting in a rage, damaging the situation beyond repair. He flew along on his bike, blaming himself resentfully. You completely lack the character of a great river. You are nothing but an ungovernable child, spoiled by those rivers. You were spoiled in your youth by the freedom of the Ertix River in the north country.

As he pedalled fiercely, the wind blew on his burning cheeks. How could I not have been spoiled, he thought; journeys along the Ertix are at least a hundred kilometres long, and the mountains at least three thousand metres above sea level. Once we walked into the Altay Mountains and fantasized of planting the flag of the Red

Guards on one of the ice-clad peaks. We were lost in the mountains, and on the same day were whipped by both a rainstorm and a snowstorm. Then we met a group of horse herders, and happily went with them on a tour of this part of Xinjiang. I was not yet twenty then, and I crossed the Ertix River clinging to a horse's neck. The river water chilled me to the bone; the snowmelt of the flood season was in spate, throwing up great waves. I can only remember the river being full of the whinnying of horses and the boisterous shouting of the Kazakh men. The spray thrown up by the horses was as thick as mist over the water. By the time I reached the opposite bank I was frozen stiff, so the herders poured a whole bottle of strong liquor down my throat. I couldn't speak as I watched them also drain bottles of the same liquor. I didn't even have time to speak a word before I was drunk, and I felt their coarse laughter shaking every cell in my body. I laughed too as I fell asleep by the campfire. The next morning when I crawled out of bed, as soon as I opened my mouth I discovered my voice had become coarse and rough like theirs. And when I took my first step, I discovered that I had begun to sway imposingly like they did. That was how I became wild and ungovernable, my dear, dedicated secretary! When I am done with my examination, I will take you a tin of powdered malt extract and apologize to you once again. It was only because I had no alternative that I was so impolite and plain-spoken. The herders of Altay scrupulously observe the rules of courtesy. I will go after taking the exam; that way Huabei will have no cause to believe that I am "offering incense" by asking you to drink a bit of malt beverage, to rest your brain and strengthen your body. And I must invite her — suddenly he remembered something: I told her I'd take her out to eat Western food to repay her for all she suffered. Sufferings that should be shared by all should not come to rest on just a few girls; Huabei would do well to agree with that.

That evening, he read over his translation of the introduction to Richthofen's *China* once again, then stapled it together neatly and set it on the corner of his desk. Then he put away the dogeared copy of *Basic Easy Japanese*; he had no idea how many times he had done the exercises in this book. He also gathered up the pile of copies of *Geographic Journal*, *Materials on Geography* and *Trends in Foreign Cultural Geography Research* and prepared to return them to Yan Lin's father. Finally, he moved his note card file over in front of him and began to flip through the cards. A feeling of satisfaction and well-preparedness came over him. He thought, these cards are the extracted essence of those texts and lecture notes. Every fact of importance, no matter whether in political studies or physical geography, anthro-

pology or the archaeology of primitive societies, is collected in these cards. In the few days left I'll be dealing exclusively with you, guys, he thought, fingering the cards. I can keep you in my pockets and pull you out to read anytime, anywhere.

He tidied the cards and then got out a sheet of paper, on which he drew nine squares. Each square represented a day; there were nine days left. Nine days from now it will be Monday; on the morning of that day I will take two fountain pens, each well-filled with ink, to the examination hall. No matter how things go with the examination pass, I'll be going to the examination hall that morning.

He moved his chair a bit and sat up straight, and then began his work.

One day passed, and he marked off the first square on his paper.

Another day passed. Seven more days, he thought, lightly ticking off the second square, which was filled with notes on his work for the day. This was a Sunday evening; his younger brother and that young woman worker had taken their mother to an opera, leaving him alone.

He wiped the desk clean, throwing away an empty cigarette pack and some bits of paper. He took the manuscript of his poem out of the drawer and slowly drew the cap from his fountain pen.

He felt his mood was unusually calm, but in the middle of the mood he felt something surging or protruding. Each heartbeat began to be heavier than the last; listening to his heartbeat he could hear a weak but sharp sound caused by that surging or protruding something. All of a sudden the sound became a rumble, and he felt as if he were being covered in raging waves. Excitedly he put pen to paper, ripping a hole in it with a slight tearing sound.

He had already finished the third section. It had taken shape all at once in the evening of the day he had come back from the Yongding River. He didn't know how many sections he wanted to write, nor just what it was he wanted to write; he just stabbed heavily at the paper with his pen, letting the scratching of the pen follow closely on the beating of his heart. He had no time to weigh his phrases, but he discovered to his delight that there were quite a number of brilliant lines waiting in his head to flow unbelievably from the tip of his pen and be deposited on the paper. But he had no time to look back and notice all this, because these waves were beating furiously against him, dashing impatiently, one after another, against his throat, his cerebrum and the hand that held the pen. The Yellow River, the Ertix, Huangshui, Wuding and Yongding; the towering peaks of the Altay Range; the gullies, ravines, ridges and loess knolls of the loess

plateau; the newly planted grove of poplars; the flocks of sheep and horses, the floating wildflowers, the stream of broken pottery pieces, the grey river bank — all of them, carrying with them a tempestuous whistling, came to him at once. The faces of all the people he had known well along the banks of the rivers and with whom he had long since parted appeared and disappeared in the waves, rising and sinking, gazing deeply into his eyes. As he wrote, his hand trembled slightly. He felt the sheer daring of his intent to describe the wildness of nature and the breadth of the world. This is the north, he thought, amazed and a bit frightened. The sheets of paper, covered with the traces of ink from his pen, flipped by one by one as he gathered his courage and continued writing. He saw a man gradually stand up beneath his pen, a youth who grew up free in the northern grasslands of Altay, a young man who grew strong and steady through heavy labour, a soldier who stood up in the midst of love and friendship, treason and loyalty, trials and contemplation. He wrote swiftly, one hand steadying the trembling thin paper. His ideals, defeats, quests, disappointments, zeal, weariness, inspiration, loathing, joy and bitterness all harmonized with the sound of the torrential waters of the rivers of the north, the crisp, clear clashing of floating pieces of ice and the torment of the body and affliction of the emotions. All of these, flowing together in a rushing stream, were transformed into a single sustained melody, a poem of youth and zeal. As he wrote, his heart was permeated by a mystical fervour. I am grateful to you, he thought. I shall always be grateful to you, rivers of the north; you bedewed my life.

He wrote page after page at one sitting. He was already scouting for an opportunity to wind things up. He knew that this outpouring of confessions must have a profound ending, one which would display great control and ability to symbolize, one which would illuminate every line of the poem in its brilliant rays, exposing a layer of inner meaning deeply buried therein. The ending must be like the great rivers of the north, rough and fresh, moving the spirit, but leaving no scars and no token.

He threw his pen down violently and jumped up. Seizing the manuscript, he flipped through its pages furiously, making them rustle.

He finished reading the poem. It's no good, he thought, replacing the poem on the table. Not only was I not able to write that ending; I couldn't bring out that great something that was leading me on. That is a mysterious spirit; all the magnetism of the north derives from it. He sat heavily in the chair and lit a cigarette, murmuring to himself. This is not because I don't understand art; it's not because

I can't write poetry. He pushed open the window and let the cool night breeze enter the small room. You have not yet found that mysterious spirit, he told himself; you do not truly understand the rivers of the north. The places you have been are still few, and your experience of the world is even more lacking. You have not yet had the time to live beside the banks of the Tarim, the Yanju and many other rivers of the north. Most importantly, you have never seen the Heilongjiang. At any rate I can't go there now, he thought, somewhat ruefully. I don't have the money, I don't have the time; I've no way to go pay my respects to and investigate that great river formed entirely from the body of a giant black dragon.

Finally he slowly slid the cap on to his fountain pen and put away his manuscript. He looked at the alarm clock; the hands read three o'clock. The last week has begun; just seven days left. He sat awhile with arms crossed, listening attentively to the tick-tock of the alarm clock. He decided to have done with the poem for the time being; he would write the ending and revise the whole thing after his trip to Heilongjiang. He stood up, massaged his numb right arm a bit, closed the window, climbed into bed and fell asleep.

She lay on her bed, drowsy and so exhausted she felt her bones were coming apart. She lacked even the strength to get up and fix herself a bowl of noodles. When she heard someone knock at the door, it was quite some time before she could muster the energy to call out a response.

Startled, she opened her eyes wide and looked at him standing in the doorway. This is the first time he has ever come to see me, she thought. Huabei is already a frequent guest, but this is the first time I've seen this one since we went to the Yongding River.

"Graduate student, how's that business of yours going?" she asked, still feeling the urge to joke with him.

Plunging his hand eagerly into his bookbag, he pulled out a piece of paper. "Look at this!" he said, his voice trembling with excitement. "Look, a pass to the examination!"

She gazed at the slip of white paper with deep emotion.

So it's just a small piece of paper, she thought. But on this small piece of paper are crystallized the oh so bitter experiences of our generation! She remembered how Huabei had also brought a white piece of paper the day before: a notice of transferal. At last, by dint of his articles, his stubborn efforts and his surpassing talent, Huabei had managed to leave that little food factory. Huabei's voice had trembled too: "My new life has begun! I am resurrected!" And she

had then as now gazed silently yet with great emotion at the official notice..

"It's wonderful," she murmured.

She prepared him a glass of orangeade and watched as he gulped it down. It's wonderful, she thought; both of them are struggling mightily, stubbornly doing battle with fate. And now they have both finally found the places they wanted for themselves, places acknowledged by people and society. They really are strong, heroic men, she thought admiringly.

He drank the orangeade in great swallows, hot air rising from the open neck of his shirt. "Have another glass," she offered, bringing over the jug of cool water and the bottle of orange concentrate. He smiled affably and drank the second glass at a single gulp. She immediately prepared him a third glass.

He wiped the corners of his mouth with his hand. "Hey, look at this," he said, stretching his arms out behind him and racing around the room taking tiny steps, his head at an angle, like a big bird loose in the room. "Whooo...." he hummed loudly. "Hey, what d'you think? Do I look like an airplane?"

Smiling, she regarded him curiously. "No. You look like a big dragonfly!" How amusing; he's not embarrassed, she thought. So this is what he's like when he's happy. With his examination pass in hand, he's just like a little kid. "You look like a big idiot!" she squealed.

"Wrong," he said, still humming and circling, "I'm a bomber. Wait and see," he said, ceasing his flight and taking up the glass. "There are five days left. Five days altogether until I bomb that examination paper to smithereens." Still excited, he stared at the orangeade in the glass, then tipped his head back and took several deep draughts.

She told him about Huabei's situation. "You've both succeeded," she said. He'll do brilliantly for sure, and now Huabei can work on the art he loves. They're both strong men, both determined, she thought with gratification. "You two are just like boulders," she said suddenly.

"What? Us — boulders?" he asked, perplexed.

"Mm," she nodded, smiling. They *are* boulders, she thought; something to depend on in our idealism.

"Let's go, photographer!" he said grandly, putting his glass on the table and making a sweeping bow of invitation. "Let us hie ourselves to the Moscow Restaurant. You'd forgotten? I told you long ago I was going to ask you out for a meal."

She stared at him blankly, then finally stood up.

They left the house, walking into the blazing sunlight. He saw her stumble with dizziness and lean against a tree for support. She's too tired; she's a very picture of paleness and thinness, he thought, and a confused tide surged in his heart. But she changed the subject without letting any anxiety show, whereupon they walked away from the tree.

As they sat down at the table, he asked, "How have you been? It's been so long since I've seen you."

"Me? Oh, I've been fine," she said. "That photo's been published." Yes, already — published. She recalled what she had seen this morning while hanging about the newspaper stand. The street was, as usual, seething with people, and the public address system was broadcasting some important piece of news or other. Keeping her eye on two young women who had just bought a copy of *Photographic Arts*, she tagged along with them for a while, listening, but soon discovered they had bought the magazine because of the organdy sweater the model on the front cover was wearing. It's been published, and there's that article by Huabei in there, too; perhaps I'll have a tiny corner at the National Photography Exhibition in the fall. But, she thought with disappointment, is this all there is to life?

The young man at the next table was eating a huge meal alone, a huge tape deck next to him on the table. A man with a deep voice was singing some song or other.

"Listen! That's Okabayashi Nobuyasu, my favourite singer," he told her confidentially. "Boy, he sure sings great," he effused, listening with concentration.

He is so full of self-confidence; with the examination near he's completely unruffled, she thought. He has so much faith in his own strength. It's true: What men have more of than women is strength; that's the biggest difference between us and them. I set my jaw and exerted my last ounce of strength, and finally all I got was that one little bit, she thought bitterly. But having got it, I am prostrate with exhaustion; I seem to have been sucked dry of all my energy, and I feel nothing but desolation. Oh, a victory like this is vicious enough, she thought, stabbing a bit of food with her fork and lifting it to her mouth to chew. So many prices to pay in life, so many varied flavours to taste — all of them wiped out at a single stroke.

Suddenly he nudged her. "Listen to this — I've heard this song before. I'll translate it from the Japanese for you." She set down her fork and listened to the guitar accompaniment coming from the tape deck at the next table.

The depth of your pain
I of course cannot understand
Why are we so far apart
In fact we've been close together all this time

She turned her head around suddenly, her hair falling to one side. Looking straight at him she said, "I must tell you something: Huabei has already asked me to marry him." She drank a sip of shandygaff. "Naturally, Huabei is rather like you, but I've been wanting to ask your opinion on the subject." Having finished, she leaned back against her chair. I understand now: Success cannot bring real change to a person's life, and it cannot really change the loneliness in her heart. I am a woman, she thought, slowly sipping her cold beer. I must have a boulder to rest upon; I must take a breather. I am really tired out.

He was silent for a long time. A long guitar solo came drifting over from the tape player at the next table. When she saw him lift his eyes, her heart jumped involuntarily. But he held up a finger: "Listen — " and then he began to translate again:

It's true, I am me
I cannot become you
Even as you struggle on your own
I can only watch in silence

She listened quietly to the song, not moving a muscle. In her mind's eye appeared, floating, another of her photos: the picture of a man throwing himself towards a Yellow River burnt red by the reflection of the evening clouds. Knowing she would finally have to say farewell to the subject of this photo, she was conscious of having, in the passage of an instant, made her choice. She fingered her ice-cold glass between sips, committing the complex and intimate flavour of this encounter to memory.

"You have some too," she said, manoeuvring on to his plate some food, which he promptly wolfed down. Watching him, it occurred to her faintly that she would never again have the opportunity to go look at any great river with this impetuous, energetic young man. Take good care of yourself, she said in her heart, silently wishing him well. She cut her food into bites with her knife and fork, and as she ate, tiny drops of perspiration appeared on her forehead. He looked up from time to time and caught sight of her somewhat blank expression. Suddenly his hands began to tremble. Ah, he thought; so this is how we say goodbye.

Just then, another long guitar solo came to an end, and the singer began another verse:

We both have our trials
But who are you, in the end, to me?
If everything goes wrong from now on
Then who will I have been to you?

As they drank beer and ate, they discussed the words to the song, and each told the other about his work. He asked her what she planned to do next, and she replied she was afraid she would probably just have to continue struggling to get things published. She asked him a few things about his upcoming exam, and he told her his plans in detail.

"Graduate student," she said, smiling, "what about when you've been accepted and finished your course of post-graduate study, received your degree and — perhaps become a lecturer, an associate professor or a full professor? What will you do then?"

"Well, I haven't really thought that far ahead," he said gravely, "but I have a feeling that I will change careers again."

"Change careers?" She was shocked. "Change careers? And do what?"

"I'd like to write poetry," he answered in a low voice.

She put down her utensils and stared at him for a long time. She asked no more questions; she knew exactly what he was talking about. After a time, she said in a thick voice, "You are both like boulders." He smiled, and lifting up his glass, he said, "Come on, let's drink a toast. To your happiness." To your happiness, twelve-year-old girl! he added to himself. She lifted her glass hastily in response: "Let me toast you as well — may you know more peace and better fortune!"

They drained their glasses, then sat and listened to the chorus of the song, sung in harmony:

It's true, I am me
I cannot become you
Even as you struggle on your own
I can only watch in silence

The singer's voice was deep and true. As they listened raptly to the song, they were both deeply moved.

From the early morning on the day was bright and breezy. He ripped a red Sunday page off his desk calendar and checked off the last square on his nine-day schedule. Telling his brother to stay home and prepare the noon meal, he went out with his mother.

He did not play football. He was afraid that going to look for Erbao would be no use; Erbao would not spend a Sunday sitting quietly at home. Supporting his mother by the arm, he strolled towards the park with her. Today is the last day, he thought; when this day is past and I have slept through the night, the fateful moment will have arrived. My cards have all been filed neatly away in their box. Tonight I must go to bed early, and I must not forget to fill my fountain pen in the morning. Today I must have a good rest and let the facts in my brain settle into orderly formation for deployment in tomorrow's battle.

He strolled slowly with his mother, talking quietly about ordinary subjects. Now and then he jumped up to grab a high leaf from a treebranch or paused to kick a stone into the lake, secretly testing the feeling in his arms and legs. I'm still young, he thought happily. I can still jump way up and grab the leaf I'd aimed for, and my knee joints are still quite elastic.

He and his mother sat down beside a stone table. As his mother peacefully sipped a jar of yogurt through a straw, he pulled out of his pocket a letter he had received just as they were setting out from home.

The letter was very simple; it was an invitation: "We request the pleasure of your company at a betrothal party at five o'clock on the twenty-eighth." He saw Xu Huabei's name and hers written next to each other in a very nice style of calligraphy.

Putting the letter on the table, he began to sip his yogurt. It's good this way, he thought; boulder is separating from boulder. The twelve-year-old girl has found her boulder, Huabei has found his victory, and you have found your rivers of the north. We have all found what we were looking for. The twenty-eighth is the day after tomorrow; by five in the afternoon I'll have finished with my examination in the fourth subject. I will go to see you, to celebrate this event with you. I will assist you in entertaining all the guests, I'll make sure that Erbao doesn't get too rowdy, and I'll take my turn holding Yan Lin's fat little son. I will quietly confer with my group of pals and decide on a new and unusual wedding gift for you. And when I return from the party, I'll get to bed early, because the next morning I will still have to take the exam in the last subject. After I have finished with the exams, five subjects in three days, I'll start to study up on the Heilongjiang River. Throughout the fall and winter of this year I'll work hard at the basics, and I'll also read a few books of poetry. I will read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in preparation for next spring's field trip. In April next year, I will head for the Heilongjiang

River, where I will wait on the icebound banks for the seventeenth of April. I will see the vast river begin to crack and thaw. I will witness the grand spectacle of the lower reaches of the river, where its entire ten-kilometre breadth will be choked with ice. I shall witness the awakening and flight of a dragon. And I will stand by the thawing river and shout to you: May you find your true boulder, and may you have the comfort of happiness, twelve-year-old girl!

"Well, shall we go, dear?" he heard his mother asking.

Standing up, he saw his mother gazing at him from under her dishevelled white hair. He smiled. They walked together further into the park. As he listened to his mother's soft shuffle and his own heavy tread, his heart was filled with a strange solemnity.

"That letter just now — was it from an old schoolmate?" his mother asked casually.

"It was from Huabei and that girl; they're going to get married," he answered.

His mother nodded silently and said no more.

Smiling in spite of himself, he looked at the slight figure walking beside him and understood the meaning behind her silence.

"Let's go, ma," he said, squeezing her shoulder with his big hand. "It'll be my turn soon," he said jokingly. "Patience."

"Really?" His mother smiled wryly and reached out to brush a leaf off his clothes.

Of course, mama. Don't feel too bad about the loss of that girl with the dark eyes. After all, she didn't understand your son, much less yourself. He looked at the tall trees on both sides of the shady path; a patch of bright sky was visible flashing through the thickly clustered branches. Of course I will get married; I'll find a girl who catches my fancy. Just as the red-faced young man of Northern Shaanxi found his wife on the banks of the Wuding River, just as the young Kazakh bucks on the banks of the Ertix find their Amina or Palidai, just as Pavel found his Taya,* just as a young boatman finds his healthy, rosy-cheeked fisherman's daughter, so I will find a girl with her hair in little plaits who will make you laugh so hard your sides will split, mama. She will follow me willingly as I roam from one great river to the next. She will have the ability to pick me out of a crowd of others, fixing me with her fiery eyes and not letting go. At a single glance she will be able to tell the difference between one rock and another. And in times of difficulty, when we true men feel we can stand no more, she will be calm and good-humoured, and

* A reference to *How the Steel Was Tempered* by N. Ostrovski, Soviet novelist.

relying on her doughtiness, I will take another deep breath and dash ahead. She must have something about her that continually excites and surprises me. She must have these qualities of yours, mama.

As he daydreamed, he watched the long shadows of himself and his mother stretching across the ground next to each other. It was quiet at the middle of the park. He listened carefully to his mother's breathing and to the echoes that came rolling across the earth.

Leaning against him, his mother walked silently along, step by step. It seemed almost as if it were not he who had brought his mother on a stroll, but rather she who was sending off her son on a long journey. As he caught sight again of her expression of intense concentration, he involuntarily grasped her thin arm again.

The morning sun, shining through the layered canopy of branches, showered them with its brightness as ray after ray shone in their faces. Goodbye, he thought, bidding the girl farewell in his heart. Let us each hasten toward our goals while the sun is yet bright. He mulled over all that had taken place since he met the girl, re-examining his own behaviour. He secretly discovered quite a few instances in which he seemed to have made mistakes, gone to extremes and misjudged things, but he also felt that these had all been unavoidable. You're still superficial, still too tender, he thought; you still lack that air of experience the great rivers have. But then he thought: Leave it to the philosophers to describe the profundities of the great rivers; I will write of their youth. The body may age, the heart may go missing a piece, but youth — even the mistakes of youth are full of enchantment. I am myself, and my rivers of the north must be rivers of fantasy, rivers of zeal, rivers of youth.

Supporting his mother, he advanced slowly along the stone path. As the leaves of the great tall poplars at the sides of the shady path rustled in the blue expanse of sky, he lifted his head and looked at the sun. What a peaceful day, he thought; this last day is almost over. Tomorrow, tomorrow I enter a new world.

The sunlight sparkled brightly on the surfaces of the thickly crowded leaves.

Mother and son followed the quiet path into the deep of the shady grove.

Heavily, sweetly he fell asleep. At first he could still hear the ticking of the alarm clock on the desk, but gradually this became assimilated into the wavelike sound of the wind. He strained his ears to listen to the wave-sound, and it seemed to him that in it he could detect movement. He turned over and pushed aside his quilt. As

he pondered over the dimly discernible piece of news he had received, he smelled the smell of river water that has been dyed a transparent black by humus soil. Heilongjiang, he muttered in his dreams. This is the smell of the water of the Heilongjiang River. The river is calling me.

Then he began to shout: "Heilongjiang —" Holding her clothes about her, his mother entered the room on light feet and tucked the light cotton quilt around him. Turning over again, he grasped the corner of the quilt tightly. The roaring sound of the waves had already swept over him, and at this moment he was lying on a dogsled racing over a vast plain of snow. He was able to dimly distinguish forests of thickly clustered conifers and deciduous trees in a dappled, dazzling, endless sea of trees as they flashed by his sled on both sides. Before him appeared a gleaming, crystal ribbon of pure white ice. Heilongjiang, I've come to see you, he called to the frozen river. It is I. In the Yellow River I found a father, and in the Huangshui my veins; now I have come to see you.

The crests and hollows of the sand islands and the crisscrossing forks of the river were swallowed up in the pure white expanse of snow. Scattered over the snow-covered, frozen ground and swamp were bushes stabbing their way up through the drifts like black pockmarks on the face of the bleak prairie. A tall, powerful man in a foxskin cap cracked a long whip at the spirited dogs, and the sled flew lightly on to the frozen surface of the river.

Thaw, Heilongjiang! he shouted. You have sealed yourself in silence since November of last year; you have slept for half a year. You have stored up enough power during the mysterious northern winter; now you must awaken! Split the hard white armour encasing you, burst apart the thousands of miles of ice stretching from your head to your tail; let the entirety of your magic carry me to your lower reaches, to where you meet the sea! When I was on the Ertix I already knew and loved your character, and at the Yongding River I understood perseverance and calm. Emerging east from Shanhaiguan,* crossing over the entire Songhuajiang-Nenjiang Plain and the Sanjiang Plain, I cross the Xing'an Range, trudge across the boundless, snowy plain, my heart filled with love for you, my life aflame; holding high my youthful poems I come to you — please thaw for me!

Taking up his poem manuscript, he began to recite into the rough whistling of the wind, reciting with such emotion his hands waved

* The easternmost gate of the Great Wall, near where it meets the sea.

about. A wild wind threw up clouds of snow and carried his lines to the heart of the river. As he read, he felt the untutored verses of his poem rising in his breast, becoming perfect in recitation, like arrow after flaming arrow ragingly ablaze, shot fiercely toward the heart of the river of ice.

A low, muted rumbling slowly arose, a great noise that shook one's very heart. The whole of the snowy plain, the entire earth of the north, moaned and trembled. The misty river of ice was thawing. The brittle armour of ice was splitting open with a cracking noise, and the black water of the river was heaving, shoving great islands of ice about. In the same instant, a current of warm air came flowing lightly over the plain of snow. The drifts melted, and trickles of water began to permeate the soil, gathering in depressions to form bright little streams which ran happily towards the great river. In the middle of the river had already appeared a gleaming path of water darker than the ice, which imperturbably began its journey downstream amidst stately music. And still the entire length of the river echoed with the cracking of the ice, while columns of ice, continents of ice, chunks of ice and islands of ice slammed frenziedly into one another in the swirling current, angrily yet with immense satisfaction. He stood agape, the manuscript clutched in his hand. The river has awoken; the Heilongjiang is stretching its muscles. He stared silently at the terrifying yet captivating river. The Heilongjiang has thawed; the black dragon is about to fly.

Bringing his dogs to a halt, the stalwart man who had been driving the sled led him to the edge of the river. On the banks stood a girl wearing a sleeveless deerskin jacket, a red scarf tied round her head. They smiled at him and directed him to board a birchbark boat.

The lissome birchbark boat seemed to be a fish, so easily did it cut through the rolling black waves and ranks of ice. Standing in the sharply pointed bow, he gazed at the endless expanse of flowing ice up and down the length of the river. He could not speak for a long time; he was practically holding his breath. He had been terrified into total submission, shocked, swallowed.

He slept deeply, peacefully. He spoke no more in his sleep. His voice had already melted into the roaring of the great river, and it seemed his body, along with the birchbark boat, had become an enormous wave. I shall soon be mature, he heard himself say in the language of waves. I shall soon be an adult. Very soon I will glimpse the secret of the north. He felt himself pressing onward with the rushing, boiling flow of the floodwaters as his heart filled with holy pride. I thank you, rivers of the north, he said. You have raised me

to adulthood in the rawness of your surroundings, unconsciously letting bravery and gravity, wildness and tenderness, tradition and civilization flow into my veins. With your powerful waves you eroded away the shell of my past; in your world I shall certainly become a true man and soldier. You allowed the Ertix River to open the way for me and the Yellow River to buoy me up; you allowed the Heilongjiang to carry me to its broad delta and put me on the path of my new life. I am grateful to you, rivers of the north.

He made a tight fist in his sleep, and a blissful smile appeared on his face. He knew he was already on his journey; he felt the strength gathering in each muscle and bone. He discovered to his delight that youth yet stirred within him. The rhythm of fresh verses dancing on the waves came to him from afar; in it he could already hazily discern a real poem. He realized that on the Heilongjiang and on every other great river of the north, this poem was about to be born. And he seemed to see, quite vividly, a girl: one whom no hardship would ever defeat, one as passionate as a flame. The girl was disdainfully crushing the thorns along the bank with her foot, walking straight towards him with deliberate steps. He slept sweetly, calmly awaiting her approach. A serene smile appeared on his face.

The last night was passing silently by. The day he had been waiting for with the scorching heat of his love and the restlessness of his spirit was arriving.

Gradually the window grew light as dawn illuminated the east.

Translated by Stephen Fleming

About “Rivers of the North”

Zhong Zhenfen

“A little shepherd, probably unable to control the impulse of his heart, lashed out with his whip at the high, mysterious iron gate. It rumbled open, and the little boy entered.

“Yet in front of him stretched a scorching desert, snowy mountains and thick thorns. The little boy was frightened, but the iron gate had already closed. He had to step forward, tentatively, on the rugged path. He walked on, recalling his little flock and his family, and his eyes filled with tears.”

Thus Zhang Chengzhi describes how he encountered literature. In eight years, he has written a number of stories, among which “Rivers of the North” and “The Gallant Black Horse” are probably the best known, and have won the second and the third national novelette awards respectively.

With irresistible momentum and beautiful rhythm, “Rivers of the North” sent a shock wave through the literary world, attracting many young readers in particular. Looking back constantly and longing for the future with self-assurance, self-respect and self-control, the hero in the story constitutes the matter of the novelette. If “The Gallant Black Horse” is an elegant, lyrical move-

Zhong Zhenfen is on the staff of Chinese Literature.



Zhang Chengzhi

ment, "Rivers of the North" is a virile, solemn symphony. The author poured so much of his vigour and emotion into "Rivers of the North" that when he wrote it he felt he was "cutting one of his own veins" and that the cut kept bleeding long after it was published.

Zhang Chengzhi likes poetry and painting. However, as a man with an M.A. in history and a researcher of the history of northwestern Chinese nationalities, he has his own unique ways of thinking and aesthetic taste. With a poet's emotion and a scholar's reflection, his works sparkle with expressiveness and solemnity. To his eyes, the flowing Yellow River seems to be made up of chunks, and its heavy waves can almost be felt, all with a strong sense of solidity. Even the cracked, thawing Heilongjiang River seems weighted down, flowing slowly but steadily. He well combines his own honest feelings with nature, which

provides him with a good basis for creation.

Born in Beijing in 1948, Zhang Chengzhi was resettled as an educated youth on the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, where he lived for four years in completely Mongolian style. Instead of complaining and cursing this period of his life, he thought the experience much more valuable than what he had lost. Almost every year since entering the History Department of Beijing University in 1971, he has travelled light by mule or tractor, hitchhiking on trucks or striding through the vast fields of the north to see his "Eji" ("mother" in Mongolian), who treated him as her own son, and his friends the gold-miners of the banks of the Yellow River, the peasants of the Loess Plateau and the herdsmen of the Yili Grasslands and the Altay Mountains.

To repay the people who fed him and cared for him and to show his

affection for them, Zhang Chengzhi has written a series of stories around mother, earth and the people. His first work was a poem in Mongolian entitled "Be the Son of the People". The amiable "Eji", the Mongolian grandmothers and the Mongolian girls with their dark, shining eyes constantly appear in his works. He took the penname "Aldinfu" ("son of the people"), showing where his feelings lie. By dint of this simple honesty, his works brim with optimism, warmth and exciting vigour.

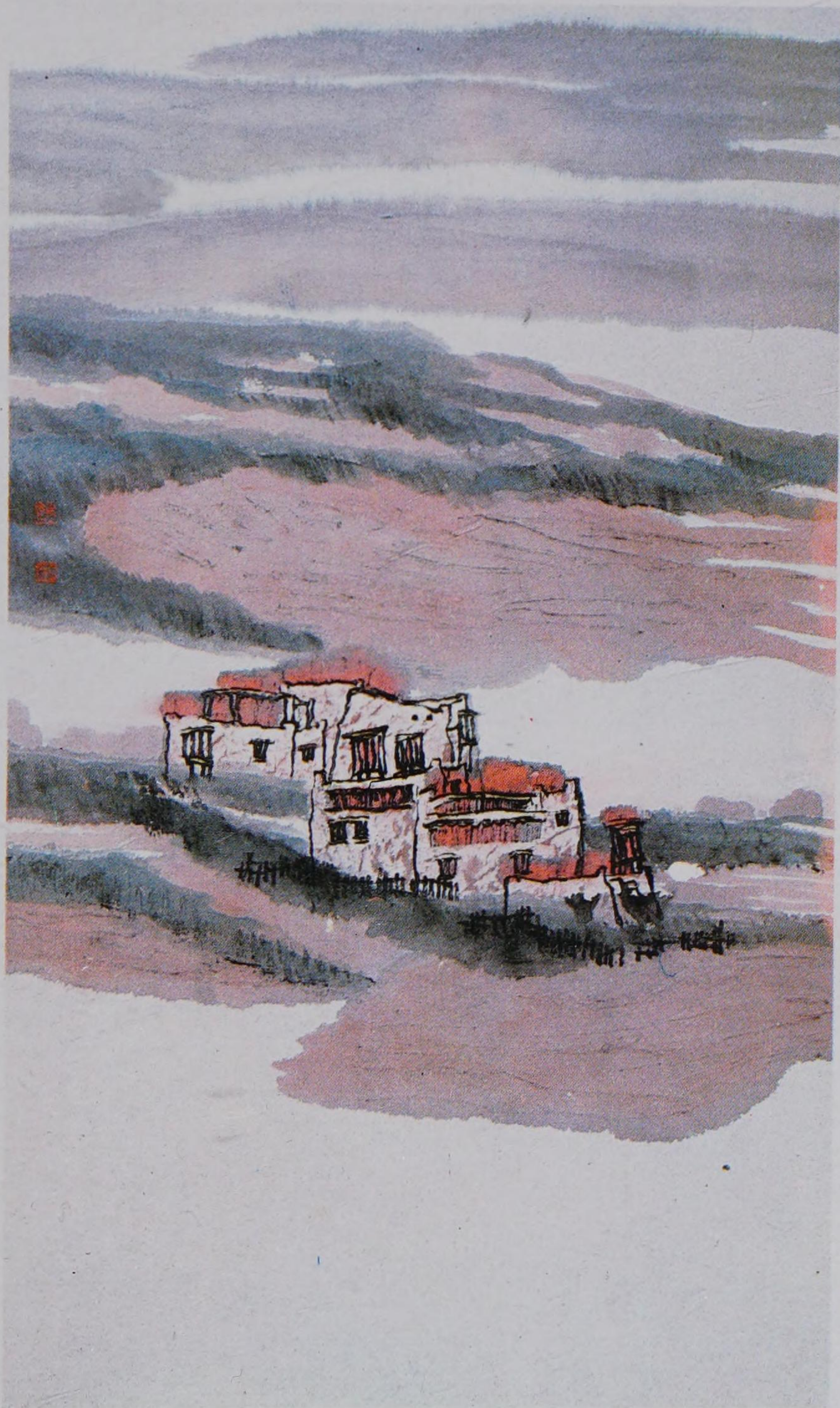
In his earlier works, it is easy to find the Russian writer Chingiz Aitmatov's lyrical style, but with maturity he has started up his own "great slope", of which "Rivers of the North" is a successful demonstration. Following the protagonist's trip and with yellow as the elemental colour for the setting of the story, the novelette reveals the wide and varied inner world of a man seeking the soul of the rivers of the north. It portrays a man and a soldier, an image of a strong man not afraid of the hard life. As the author tells us in the prologue, his aim is to raise a monument to the whole generation who lived through unusual days in an unusual age, meeting ten years of disaster in their teens, almost every one of them swept into its frenzied movement. In the process of growing up, they experienced perplexity, agony, struggle and failure, and their beliefs were profoundly shaken. Yet they did not give up their hopes. Instead, from the nation's history and the ever-rolling "rivers of the north", they regained their footing, from which to

step forward eventually, yet steadily. Always on a trek, they are continuously climbing one after another of the "great slopes" of life. This state of mind is common to both author and protagonist. The whole story carries a heavy but bright historical burden, a recalling of an individual's experiences, a bleak meditation on a whole generation's setbacks and a deep longing to grasp the entire history of the northern peoples.

Zhang Chengzhi brings much lyricism and romanticism to his stories, evidence of a poetic temperament. An introverted protagonist, his meditative monologues appear very subjective, sometimes extreme.

Zhang Chengzhi also uses much symbolism. Surroundings not only are geographical but also personify nature; the Yellow River is not just a grand, rolling river, but an "honest, self-confident, tough father" who gives simple comfort to the protagonist and protects him across the violent waters. Similarly, the broken jar, representing the whole generation's injured life, is redolent of grievous pity. The wild, boundless life of the north gives the protagonist strong bones and fresh blood, an exciting, healthy life that city dwellers seldom know. It is a primitive life, some would say wild, retaining a precious purity and honesty that make good the drawbacks of modern civilization, an essential compensation which alone can produce "joyous, healthy babies" to "bury the feeble, painful moans under their cheerful laughter".

Translated by Shi Junbao

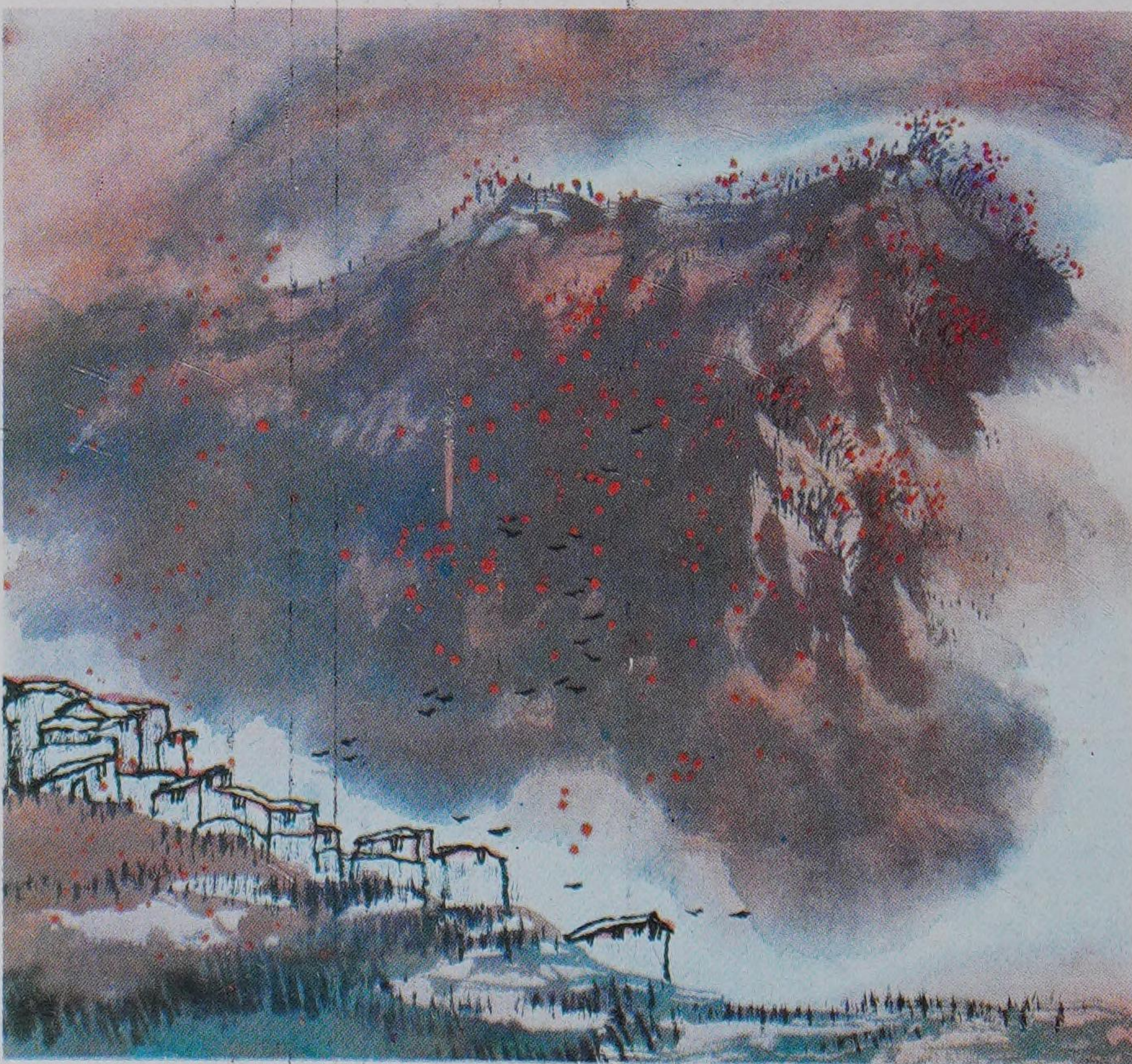


Clouds Over the Plateau

*Zhao Zhunwang's Paintings
From the Long March*



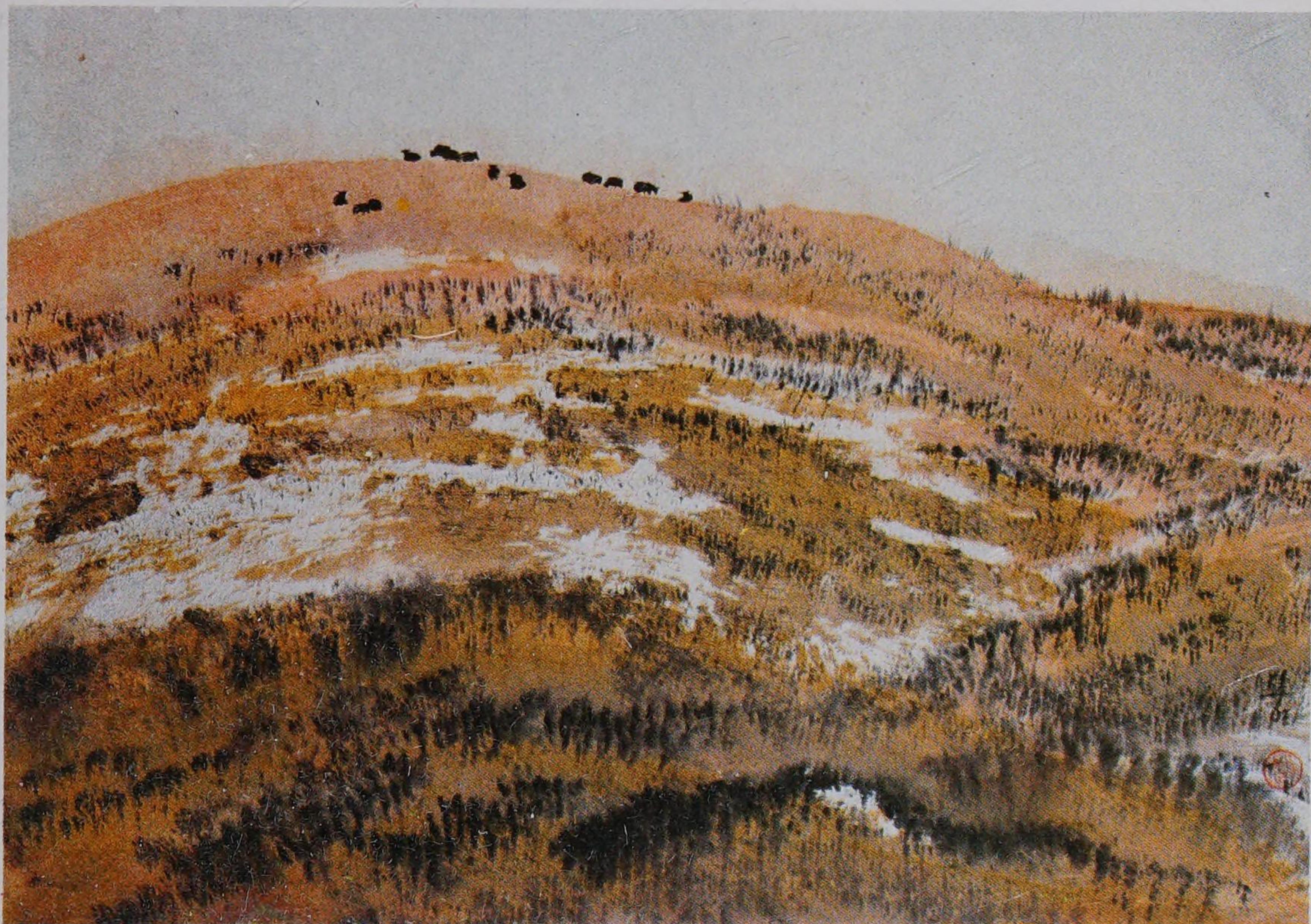
Border Song



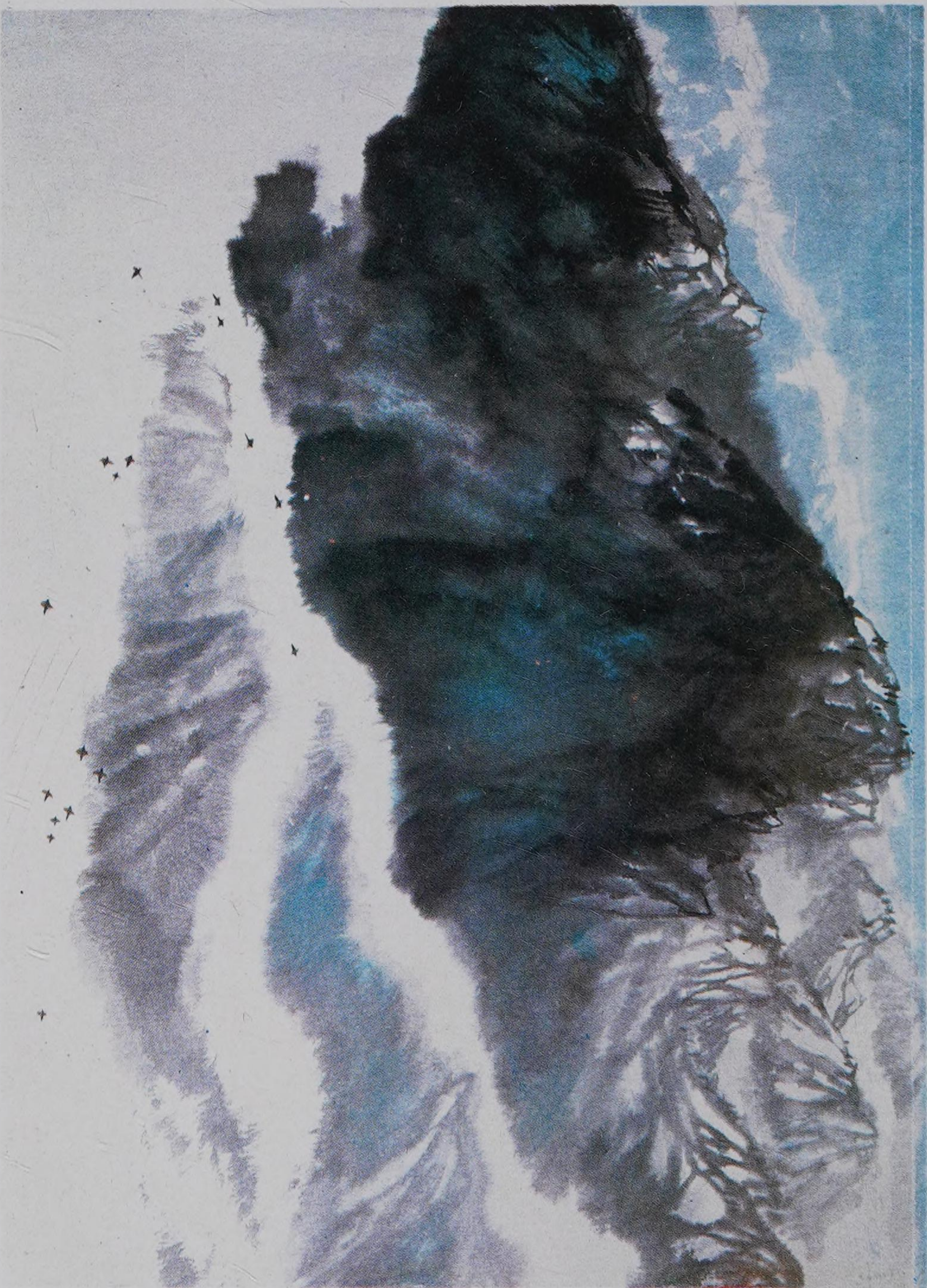
Golden Autumn



Dawn Pasture



Golden World



The Bashan Mountains in Splashed Colours

Zhao Zhunwang's Sketches of the Route of the Long March

In the autumn of 1985 Zhao Zhunwang made a hard and unforgettable journey along the route of the Red Army's Long March. Starting from Ruijin, he travelled more than 15,000 kilometres across mountains and rivers, crossing the snow-covered Mengbi Mountains at Markang, climbing the Aba Plateau and treading the Ruorgai Grassland, covering all the historic spots of the Long March. Despite the danger of steep hills and landslides, the painter feasted upon the grand scenery along the road, became conversant with the local customs of different nationalities and realized the extraordinary achievements of the Chinese Red Army. As he said, "I could not help being moved by the heroic spirit of the Red Army that had walked through all these deserted places under unremitting attack from its enemies."

On the way he drew a couple of hundred sketches, painted some eighty traditional Chinese paintings

and took two thousand or so photographs. Those reproduced here are some of the fruits of his arduous journey. More than mere landscapes, they embody the painter's own personal feelings, his admiration for the beauty of his country and deep respect and love for the Red Army. Very often, Zhao uses ink, colour and water splashes to give the painting a sense of simplicity, brevity and unity. For instance, in *The Bashan Mountains in Splashed Colours*, the snowy peaks extend into the distance in splashes and lines above clouds and mists represented by empty spaces and thin ink, a foil to the towering peaks. The dots of birds hovering in the clouds express the painter's feelings and harmonize with the structure of the painting. The technique in *Dawn Pasture* and *Pastoral* is more or less the same. In *Golden World* Zhao splashes the sky and the grass and then rubs dry ink on the still-wet paper so that they mix, giving mistiness, broadness and strong lyricism.

Born in 1944 and a native of Beijing, Zhao is now a member of the Chinese Artists' Association. Family influence inculcated in him an early

Rui Lin works for Chinese Literature.



Zhao Zhunwang

love of painting, followed by regular study in the Jiangsu Chinese Painting Academy under Ya Ming, a master of round and free technique. In years of painting he has been probing for a contemporary style of his own. At present he is devoting himself to the exploration of ancient Chinese techniques in their various manifestations like drawing with a dry brush, splashing ink to achieve different perceptual layers of colour, turbid waters done with conspicuous ink, free rhythmical painting and the

correspondence of full and empty space. The results are fresh and pregnant without any trace of artificiality.

Zhao Zhunwang's paintings and sketches have been published by the People's Liberation Army Publishing House to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Long March. They will be exhibited in Britain in October 1987 and published for worldwide distribution.

Translated by Wang Chiying

Rouge

Pu Songling

(1640-1715)

A cattle-doctor named Bian in the town of Dongchang had a daughter whose baby name was Rouge, a pretty girl and clever and the apple of her father's eye. He wanted her to marry into a scholarly family without official status, but none of the society families would condescend to so humble a match, and so she reached womanhood without having been betrothed.

The ex-Miss Wang, now married to Mr Gong across the street, was a frivolous woman who came to Rouge's chamber to discuss personal affairs. She was just leaving one day when they saw a young man pass the door, very elegant of bearing and dressed in white mourning. Rouge, being most taken with him, showered him with amorous glances, but he lowered his head and hurried by. She continued to gaze after him until he was far away.

"An enviable catch for a girl in your position, my dear," said Wang, who had perceived her interest. Rouge's cheeks went quite red, but she was too deeply moved to speak a word.

"Do you know who he is?" asked Wang.

"No."

"E Qiusun, the graduate from South Street, son of the late imperial graduate. We used to live on the same block. That's how I know him. There isn't a more charming man alive. He's not out of mourning for his wife yet, as you can see from his clothes. If you fancy him, why not get someone to put in a word for you?"

Rouge said nothing, and Wang left with a laugh.

Days went by, and nothing happened. Rouge suspected that either Wang had not found the time to go or the young man was too grand to stoop to her level, and this put her into such a quandary of miserable reflection that she began to lose her appetite and no longer had the energy to get out of bed. Wang came over to see what was the matter with her and asked what had made her so ill.

"Even I don't know," said Rouge. "Ever since that day I've felt as if I were in a trance. I seem to be living on borrowed time."

"My man is away on business, so there's no one yet to talk it over with young Mr E. That's what's the matter with you, dear, isn't it?" said Wang gently. "I'm quite sure it is," she went on teasingly, as Rouge went crimson and remained so. "We can't have scruples with you in this state. Ask him over some evening. I shouldn't think he'll say no."

"I can't be bashful any longer," sighed Rouge, "not now that it's got this far. I will recover if he will overlook the difference in our positions and send a matchmaker, but I absolutely refuse to have a private arrangement." Wang nodded and left.

A neighbour of Wang's called Su Jie, with whom she had been friendly before her marriage and who often sought her out when he was sure that her husband was away, came over that night. She told him what Rouge had said, thinking he would be amused, and jocularly urged him to let Mr E know that he had an admirer. Su was secretly pleased at news that might forward his own purposes, for he had known for some time of Rouge's beauty. Rather than have Wang privy to his scheme and risk her jealousy, he inquired with deceptive nonchalance, though in some detail, what access there was to Rouge's chamber.

The next night he climbed in over the wall, went straight to where she was and tapped on her window with his finger.

"Who's there? What is it?" asked Rouge.

"It's Mr E."

"I had thought of you, sir, in terms of a lifetime, not an evening. If you truly love me, you must send a third party to make a match. I will have nothing to do with anything clandestine."

Pretending to agree, Su earnestly begged that he might shake her slender wrist in token of this, and as she did not like to seem too cold, she gathered her ailing strength and opened the door. At once he was inside, clasping her to him lasciviously, and lacking the force to fend him off, she fell prostrate and breathless to the floor, from which he hastened to retrieve her.

"Who do you think you are, you wicked young man?" she said. "This is most unlike the kindly Mr E, who would pity a poor woman's indisposition rather than use it as a pretext to burst in upon her like a madman. If you continue in this manner, I shall die, for what else can avail me if my virtue is forfeit?"

Fears that his chicanery would be known deterred Su from any further attempt, and he asked merely for an assignation, which she prom-

ised him — on their wedding day. He objected that this was too far off and asked her to change it, and so to be rid of him she said she would see him when she was better. He asked for a keepsake and, when she refused, snatched an embroidered shoe from her foot and carried it off.

"I have given my word," she cried, calling him back. "What more do you want? Shame and reproach are ruinous gifts, be warned! I do not expect to have returned to me anything I have worn so intimately that you have touched, but if you break faith, there is but one death!"

Su left and made his way back to Wang's for the night. He went to bed but could not stop thinking about the shoe. He felt for it furtively in his sleeve. Where had it gone? He got up quickly, lit the lamp and shook out all his clothes in search of it. He questioned Wang and, when she did not reply, suspected that she had hidden it. She laughed, making him all the more suspicious. Unable to find peace, he told her what had happened, then searched thoroughly outside with a candle, again without success. He returned despondently to bed, hoping secretly that it was still lying in the road where he had dropped it in the lonely night.

He was up early to look for it. There was no sign of it there either.

Wang had been courted by, and rejected, an unemployed layabout on the street known as Big Mao, who had discovered that she and Su were intimate and decided to warn him off by means of a covert attack. Passing her gate that night, he had given it a push and, finding it unbarred, had slipped in. He had just got to the window when he had tripped over something downy, which when he picked it up had proved to be a woman's slipper wrapped in a cloth. He had crouched down to listen and been entranced by Su's detailed account of his escapade, after which he had withdrawn.

He let a few days go by, then climbed into Rouge's house, but being unfamiliar with the layout ended up at the rooms occupied by her father, who through his window spied a man, obviously, from the look and sound of him, after his daughter. Furious, he grabbed a sword and went straight out. Big Mao turned and fled in panic. Bian caught up with him just as he was about to scale the wall, so that Mao was trapped, turned and grabbed Bian's blade. Mrs Bian set up a hue and cry, and Mao found himself with no other means of escape than to kill Mr Bian.

Rouge, slightly recovered, got out of bed as soon as she heard the shouting and went out with a candle, which showed her her father, his head split open and unable to speak. He lived only a short while.

At the foot of the wall lay the embroidered shoe. Her mother looked at it and saw that it was Rouge's. Pressed by her mother's questions, Rouge confessed tearfully what had happened, except that to spare Wang the embarrassment of involvement she said that young Mr E had come of his own accord.

The crime was reported at daybreak, and E was detained by the town magistrate. A reticent youth of nineteen and bashful as a boy in company, E was terrified out of his wits at being arrested. In court he could think of nothing to say, and his trembling only served to reinforce the magistrate's impression of his guilt. He was shackled and, unable to stand the ordeal, left the false charge unopposed. They hauled him off to the prefectural capital, where he was flogged and scourged as he had been in the town.

E tried to confront Rouge with the monstrous wrong she had done him, but she heaped such abuse on him whenever she met him that he was too tongue-tied to defend himself. He was condemned to death. The case was reviewed several times, but with no change of verdict.

At last the matter was referred for judgment to the provincial authorities at Jinan, at that time presided over as governor by Wu Nandai, who doubted the minute he saw him that E was the stuff murderers were made of and sent people to question him at leisure and in private so as to hear all he had to say, which convinced him all the more that E had been the victim of injustice. He turned the matter over in his mind for several days before bringing it to court.

"Did anyone else know that the arrangement had been made?" he then asked Rouge.

"No, no one."

"And was anyone else present when you met Mr E?"

"No, no one," she repeated.

He called for the young man to be brought before him and spoke to him kindly to put him at his ease.

"I did once pass by her gate," he volunteered, "but hurried straight on when I saw my old neighbour Miss Wang with a young woman, since when we have not spoken."

"Did you not precisely state," he shot at Rouge, threatening to punish her, "that no one else was present? How come this neighbour was there?"

"Miss Wang was there, yes," said Rouge, frightened, "but she was not involved in what happened."

The governor halted the proceedings and ordered the arrest of

Wang. She was apprehended and brought straight before the court without being allowed any contact with Rouge.

"Who was the murderer?" he asked her.

"I don't know," replied Wang.

"Rouge has confessed," he said guilefully, "that you are quite aware of the identity of Bian's killer. Why do you conceal it?"

"That's a lie!" she cried. "The lewd slattern wanted a man. I may well have said I'd help her get one, but only as a joke. How she got her fancy man into the house I'm sure I don't know. That was her own doing."

The governor, by close questioning, elicited the circumstances of the "joke" and then called for Rouge.

"You say this woman knew nothing of what went on," he railed at her. "How can that be, when she has just admitted complicity?" Rouge burst into tears.

"I was unworthy of my father," she sobbed, "and caused his cruel death, and I had no idea how many years the case would take. I honestly just couldn't bear to drag anyone else into it."

"Did you," the governor asked Wang, "at any time after this joke, mention it to anyone else?"

"Not to anyone," she said.

"How can you say that," he asked angrily, "when a man and wife may not have secrets from each other in bed?"

"My husband has been away for some time."

"That may be so, but the point of any joke is to show off one's own intelligence at the expense of another's stupidity. It is not to be credited that no one was told." He ordered all her fingers shackled, and she broke down.

"I told Su," she confessed, whereupon the governor released E and arrested Su.

"I know nothing," he said when he was fetched.

"No gentleman spends the night with a whore!" said the governor and had him secured tightly.

"Very well," confessed Su, "I did play a trick on her, but I didn't dare go back after I had lost the shoe. I know nothing about the murder."

"Burglary stops nowhere!" snapped the governor.

He had him secured once more, and Su admitted the false charge too, rather than face torture. Wu's acumen was praised on all sides when the confession was reported to his superiors. The proof was conclusive, and Su was remanded under sentence of death, to be executed that autumn.

Self-indulgent and ill-mannered as he was, Su was also for all that one of the premier scholars of Shandong and, learning of the highly praised sagacity and sympathy for erudition of Inspector Shi Yushan, composed a movingly worded lyric castigating the injustice done to him. Shi asked to read his confession.

"Justice has miscarried!" said Shi, slapping the desk, after he had gone over the confession several times, and he applied to the police and justiciary for a further retrial.

"Where was the shoe dropped?" he asked Mr Su.

"I forget, but it was still in my sleeve when I knocked at Wang's door."

Next Wang was questioned.

"How many other illicit men friends do you have besides Su?"

"None."

"As licentiousness goes, that is very exclusive."

"Su and I have known each other since we had our milk teeth, so I couldn't say no. Yes, I have had other propositions, but I have never dreamed of accepting them."

She was asked to corroborate this by identifying the men in question.

"Big Mao, who lives in our district, has asked me several times, and I've always refused him."

"A sudden access of honour, perhaps?" said Shi, and ordered her flogged, only releasing her when she pleaded that there had been no one, beating her head until the blood ran. She was then interrogated again.

"Had no visitors taken advantage of your husband's absence?"

"Debtors and toadies, yes. I had a few visits from —" and here she named two local ruffians who had shown an interest in her but nothing more.

Shi had all these men checked in the rolls and arrested. When they had been gathered together, he took them to the city god's temple, where he had them prostrate themselves before the altar and spoke as follows:

"A divine communication has been vouchsafed me in a dream informing me that one of your number was the murderer. We speak now with the gods, and woe betide him who lies! A pardon is still possible if the culprit comes forward, otherwise justice will be done ruthlessly."

They declared in unison that they had had nothing to do with the murder. Shi laid the instruments on the ground ready, and as their hair was put up and their thighs bared, they together raised a cry of wretched injustice, whereupon he ordered them unbound.

"Let the spirits point to the guilty man, since he will not come forward," said Shi. He had the windows of the hall blacked out with felt mattresses till there was no chink left, then had the prisoners stripped to the waist and driven into the dark, where they were given basins of water and told to wash thoroughly. They were then lined up against the wall.

"Face the wall and do not move," he warned them. "The gods will write on the murderer's back."

After a while he called them out and examined them. "This is the murderer," he said, pointing at Mao.

What he had in fact done was to have the wall plastered with ashes and their hands washed in coal tar. The murderer, fearful that the gods would write on him, hid his back against the wall, which coloured it grey, and protected it with his hands as he was leaving, which left tar marks. This confirmed Shi's suspicion of Mao, who now came out with the truth under cruel torture.

The judgment given was as follows:

"Su Jie let a limited wit pave the way to death and a name for lechery. He turned the innocence of two children into the passion of a wild drake for a cooped hen. At the drop of a word he turned from one conquest to lust after another. Despite warning, he climbed a wall only to be trapped like a bird. He penetrated a fairy cave under false pretences, tricking its occupant into opening the door. Yet the lascivious intruder is barer without his shame than the rat with its skin. Where are the manners of a gentleman who breaks trees climbing for flowers?

"Fortunately the pretty call of the sick swallow prompted him to leave the precious lady; his tenderness for the weak, faded willow was not the oriole's savagery. As befitted a man of letters, he released the tender fledgling from his net, yet like a rogue he wrested a tryst from her stockinged foot! Butterflies cross walls, and windows have ears; the petal the lotus shed begot falsehood within falsehood, and none believed the wrong beyond the wrong. Calamities befell, and torture almost destroyed him, and if in the event his head had fallen, the fault would have lain with none but himself. Burglary and taking advantage disgrace the scholar's cap; and injustice is surely not simply expunged when the plum withers beside the blighted peach. It will be expedient, then, to remit the worst of his flogging in view of the punishment already received and to demote him one year in his examinations so that he may start afresh.

"As for Big Mao, a rootless trickster and a public menace, his fair neighbour's rebuff was no setback to his lust, and the appearance of

a wild boy entering a lane afforded him all at once the illicit knowledge to bring it to fruition. The door was open to the wind, and he joyously stepped into the role of the intended beau. Searching for juice, he had come upon wine, and the master of guile fancied another's perfume, little imagining that souls are snatched from heaven but demons from hell. He was astride the driftwood bound straight for the wide, cold palace of the skies — or he was afloat in a fishing boat that missed its way to the hidden land of peaches. The fire of love breathed its own flame, and the sea of passion rose in storm. He was set upon with a naked blade by one intent on the rat. The intruder was at bay, up and snapping like a startled hare. He had penetrated into another's home under the guise of being another. A weapon was snatched, a shoe dropped, and the swan was entangled in the net the fish had escaped. This is a demon of lechery, for no true love bears such furies! Let his head be cut from his neck forthwith, and all men rejoice!

"As for Rouge, unspoken for in marriage, though of an age to put up her hair, by nature a fairy princess of the moon worthy of a jewel among youths, a rainbow-clad dancer in no danger of humble penury, she was inveigled by cooing doves into thoughts of the perfect match and finally trapped in a spring dream. Denied the fruit of her years, her longed-for cavalier, she passed into an amorous decline, where one thread entangled her, and the demons were upon her in their hordes. Alas! fights over feminine beauty are apt to spoil rouge, and the raptors were on the wing, each claiming to be the hawk of autumn*. No petal retains its fragrance when the sinuous lotus is plucked clean, and the iron barrier crashed in, all but smashing the pent-up treasure. She dived with her deepest thoughts and made them the source of her woe, for the great tree fell to the axe, and in truth its darling was its bane. Luckily she kept a solemn dignity, and this white jewel was not stained; she fought doggedly when the cuffs were on her, and a brocade counterpane can now cover all. She refused her intruder and retained a spotless love; thus the fulfilment of her adoration may yet be a deed of refinement and elegance. Let a match be made for her by her local magistrate."

The court rose, and word of the proceedings spread near and far.

It was not until Governor Wu's interrogation that Rouge realized how wronged E had been. Bashfully, she held back tears when they met on the floor of the courtroom, unable to express the regret that obviously pained her. He sensed the sincerity of her passion and the

* E's given name, Qiusun, means "Hawk of Autumn".

depth of her devotion, yet considered also how ridiculous he would look if he married a woman of humble background, pointed and stared at daily by the courtroom throng. The problem exercised him day and night, but he was nowhere near mastering himself. The verdict finally decided him. He placed his suit in the hands of the local magistrate, and the bridal musicians were sent.

Indeed! (*appends the chronicler of these wonders*) Care in a judge is of vital importance. One may be aware that the plumtree's affliction is innocent, but who reflects that the withered pear is just as much a victim? There is a chink in every pall of darkness that only judicious inquiry will reveal. Alas! men bask in the light of the wise verdicts of the wise, oblivious of their painstaking craftsmanship, while those set in authority over the people fritter away their days at the chess-board and hand down decisions from silken quilts, never thinking to lift a finger for their underlings' cares or their people's peril. When the drumroll announces the court open, they sit in majesty, silencing the cries around them with shackles. Small wonder, then, that injustice swims in the covered basin!

Sunset Cloud

The fifth day of the fifth month is celebrated around the mouth of the Yangtse with dragon boat races. The dragons are dugouts painted with scales and decorated in gold and emerald. They have carved ridgepoles and vermilion rails, and their sails and flags are all made of embroidered brocade. From ten-foot-high sterns, which form the dragon's tail, they trail wooden boards hung from cloth cables, and on these boards perch boys who perform headstands and tumble and do a variety of clever tricks.

Suspended above the water as they are, there is a danger that they will fall in, so their parents are offered financial persuasion to train them before they are engaged, so that there are no regrets if they do

in fact drown. Suzhou carries on its trade in incomparably beautiful courtesans in no different a manner.

A boy from Zhenjiang called Jiang Aduan already surpassed the rest for agility and ingenuity at the age of seven and was still working, commanding a growing reputation and a growing price, at sixteen, when he drowned below Jinshan, lamented alone by Mother Jiang, whose only son he was. Unaware of his own death, Aduan was conducted by two men to another, underwater world, gazing around at the billowing waters that towered above him like cliffs.

Presently a palace appeared, where sat a helmeted man whom his guides introduced as the Lord of the Dragon's Lair, making Aduan prostrate himself, whereat His Lordship became more genial.

"If you have the skill, Aduan," he said, "you may enter the Ministry of Willow Twigs."

Thence he was led away to a place enclosed by spacious halls, where he was greeted by youths emerging from the east colonnade, towards which his guides were steering him. The youths were in the main thirteen or fourteen years of age, and with them was a venerable lady whom they addressed as Grandmother Xie. She sat and directed him to display his skill. He had been taught the Dance of the Flying Thunder over the Qiantang River, as well as the Music of the Balmy Wind on Lake Dongting, but when the drumroll and the clash of the gong died away, the courtyard was left in silence. Worrying Aduan might not learn all the tricks, she tried to give him a few more tips. However, having practised once, Aduan learned everything.

"With this one," she said happily, "we shall not yield to Sunset Cloud!"

Next day all the ministries were gathered together to be inspected by the Lord of the Dragon's Lair. First to be inspected was the Ministry of Goblins, who had the heads of demons and were dressed like fish. They sounded great gongs some four feet round, and their drums, which maybe four men could have joined hands to encompass, made a noise like immense thunderclaps, drowning out all chatter. Huge waves welled up as they began their dance and flowed across the empty space, and any starlight that fell upon them was extinguished as it touched.

The Lord of the Dragon's Lair stopped them abruptly and called in the Ministry of Young Warblers, exquisite girls of sixteen playing daintily on pipe-organs. Now a clear wind arose, the sound of waves died away, and the water gradually solidified into a crystalline world, transparent from top to bottom.

Each group, its inspection over, withdrew to the foot of the west steps.

The next ministry to be inspected was that of Swallows, their hair still in childish tufts. One among them, a maiden of some fourteen or fifteen years, shook her sleeves and tilted her hair, that was dressed in rings, as she performed the Flower Scattering Dance, during which she circled up into the air, as from her bosom, sleeves, stockings and shoes flowers of all colours fluttered down in the wind to drift across the whole courtyard.

Aduan followed her out of the corner of his eye as she joined her companions at the foot of the west steps after her dance, for he was strongly attracted to her. From his fellows in his own ministry he ascertained that she was Sunset Cloud, then he was interrupted by the call for the Ministry of Willow Twigs.

The Lord of the Dragon's Lair set Aduan a special test, and Aduan danced out in front, gaily or spiritedly as the music required, his body rising and falling in time to the rhythm. Pleased with his perspicacity, the Lord of the Dragon's Lair presented him with a variegated one-piece suit and a golden headband, in the form of a fish's feelers, set with night-shining pearls. These Aduan accepted with a bow then descended the steps to where everyone stood in their own ranks. He kept his eye on Sunset Cloud from afar, and she on him, and in a short time he had wormed his way to the north edge of his ministry and she gradually to the south edge of hers, so that they were only yards apart, though the strictness of the rules deterred them from breaking rank, and they could but gaze at each other with longing.

When the inspection concluded with the Ministry of Butterflies, boys and girls of all heights and ages dressed in yellow and white who sought out partners and danced in pairs, the ministries filed out, Aduan hurrying forward to the front of his and Sunset Cloud dawdling to the rear of hers, which preceeded it. Catching sight of him over her shoulder, she let drop a coral hairpin, which he put hurriedly into his sleeve.

When he got back, his thoughts dwelt on her so fixedly that he fell ill and for a time neither slept nor ate. Grandmother Xie kept sending him delicacies and checked on him three or four times a day, caressing him most attentively, but he was slow mending. Worry drove her to scheming.

"It's nearly the Prince of the River Wu's birthday. What shall we do then?" she wondered.

Evening was drawing on when a boy came and sat on Aduan's cot

to talk to him, introducing himself politely as from the Ministry of Butterflies.

"You're not sick on account of Sunset Cloud, are you?" he inquired easily.

"How did you know?" asked Aduan, astonished.

"She's the same, that's all."

Desolate, Aduan sat up and asked what could be done.

"Can you still walk?" asked the boy.

"Just about, if I try."

The boy led him out through a south-facing door, turned west and threw open a pair of double doors on to acre upon acre of lotuses growing on flat ground with leaves as big as seating mats, flowers the size of canopies and fallen petals a foot deep beneath them.

"Sit here for now," said the boy, leading him among them, then went off.

In a while a beautiful girl pushed her way through the lotuses, and it was Sunset Cloud. Delighted to see each other, they told each other all their thoughts and a little about their lives, then weighted down leaves round about to protect themselves effectively from observation, strewn petals to form a mat and slept happily and cosily.

They parted, having arranged to meet daily at sundown, and Aduan recovered really very rapidly as soon as he got back. They met once a day thereafter in the acres of lotuses.

Some days later they attended the Lord of the Dragon's Lair to the birthday celebrations of the Prince of the River Wu, and when these were over they all came back except Sunset Cloud and one of the Young Warblers, who were retained to teach his palace dancers. Not a word was heard from them for several months, and Aduan began to feel disconsolately that he had lost her. The only contact with the Halls of the River Wu was Grandmother Xie, who went back and forth every day, and Aduan begged her to take him along as Sunset Cloud's cousin in hope of seeing her. He stayed outside the gate for days, but the palace was securely guarded, and Sunset Cloud could not get out however hard she tried. He returned sullenly.

The months rolled by, and he was overwrought with longing, when one day Grandmother Xie appeared in low spirits.

"Such a pity!" she said dolefully. "Sunset Cloud has drowned herself."

Aduan, overcome with shock, snivelled uncontrollably, then broke his cap and tore his clothes, put away his jewelry and went out, meaning to follow her into death. But his head banged against the cliff-like waters of the river without going in. He considered going back,

but feared that his punishment would be the greater if they found out about his cap and clothes, so that he was thrown into such consternation that sweat dripped to his heels.

All at once he spied a great tree at the foot of the cliff, and scrambling up this right to the topmost bough he leapt down wildly. Fortunately he made no splash and eventually rose to the surface, where afar off and beyond his hopes he could make out the world of men. He swam towards it with great sweeps and in time reached dry land, where he sat a while on the riverbank then, thinking of his aged mother, he took a boat and left.

He reached the village and looked around for the cottage but was as confused as if in another world. When he stumbled upon it he suddenly heard a girl at the window say, "It's your son!" in a voice very like Sunset Cloud's, and when in a moment she emerged with his mother, it was indeed she. The couple's grief was conquered by joy, while the mother did not know what to do for this sudden joy in the uncertainty of her grief.

At the River Wu, Sunset Cloud had felt a movement in her belly, and rather than be flogged with thorns when she produced a child — so strict are the palaces of dragons — and never see Aduan again, she had made up her mind to die by throwing herself into the river. She had floated, bobbing up and down in the waves, until rescued by a passenger boat.

They had asked her where she lived, and Sunset Cloud, who had been a courtesan in Suzhou whose body had never been found when she drowned, decided when she thought about it that she would rather not return to the house of ill fame.

"My husband's family are the Jiangs of Zhenjiang," she had said, and they had rented a small boat to take her there. Mother Jiang had suspected there was some mistake, but the girl had assured her there was none and recounted the details of her story, and as she was a sweet-natured girl, the old lady had quite taken to her. Her only misgiving had been that she looked too young to be content with a life of widowhood. Still, the girl had been attentive and sold her jewels for tens of thousands of taels when she saw how poor a home it was. It had warmed Mother Jiang's heart to see what a will she had.

Nonetheless, Mother Jiang had discussed with the girl her doubt whether, in the absence of her son, the story would gain any credence in the village when the child was born.

"It need not be called to their attention, provided that you get your

own grandchild," the girl had said, and Mother Jiang had let it go at that.

Sunset Cloud was beside herself with joy at Aduan's return, but his mother wondered whether he was not after all dead. Secretly she opened his grave, and there was his skeleton intact. It was only when she apprised him of this that Aduan was jolted into self-realization, though he asked her not to repeat it in case Sunset Cloud objected to his not being a living man. She agreed to this and spread the word in the village that the corpse recovered had not been her son's. Troubled for all this with doubts as to his ability to father a child, she was not reassured until the baby was at last born and found on inspection to be a normal little boy in all respects.

In time Sunset Cloud came to realize that Aduan was not alive. "You should have told me to begin with," she said. "The souls of ghosts who wear the livery of a dragon's palace for seven times seven days set hard so that they are no different from living people, and dragon's horn glue from such a palace knits the bones so that muscle and skin will grow. If only we had procured some!"

The family became immensely wealthy when Aduan had converted his pearls into cash with a foreign merchant, realizing several million, and when they celebrated his mother's birthday by singing and dancing at her party, news of them came to the ears of the Prince of the River Huai, who conceived a desire to carry off Sunset Cloud.

He was dissuaded by Aduan, who in trepidation went to see him, recounted his story and told him that both he and his wife were ghosts, which was believed when no shadow could be made out. Instead the Prince sent some of his women to a detached courtyard to learn her skills, and Sunset Cloud stained her complexion with turtle's urine before appearing. She left after three months, before she had taught them all she might have done.

Translated by Simon Johnstone

The Position of "Tales of Liao-zhai" in the History of Chinese Fiction

Chinese classical fiction has received unprecedented attention since Liberation, and notable achievements have been made in research in the field. Certain works of Chinese classical fiction have already come to be studied on a par with other works of international literary stature. Comparatively speaking, however, Pu Songling's *Tales of Liao-zhai* (*Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*) has not yet received the notice it deserves. In terms of the relative abundance, thoroughness and systematic nature of the materials available concerning the author's life and family background, and the excellent preservation and wide circulation of his works, of which the author's hand-written copies still exist, potential for the study of this work could be said to exceed that of any author in the history of Chinese fiction, or even in all of Chinese literary history. However, after visiting Pu Songling's ancestral home, I found to my surprise that I was left with the unhappy impression that there has been much less research done on Pu Songling than on other authors; it seems the number of works written on him is smaller even than the number of works written about Tao Yuanming (a Jin Dynasty poet), and is a mere tenth of the number of those written on *Outlaws of the Marsh*, to say nothing of those concerning *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which has its own special term, "Redology", for the field of studies concerning it. That such a discrepancy exists is due to a number of complicated factors. However, I feel the major factor in this has been insufficient research into the question of the historical position *Liao-zhai* should occupy in the history of Chinese fiction, or

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even in the history of Chinese literature. One might say, in other words, that the work has not been "given its proper seating arrangement", with the result that it has heretofore been unable to elicit wider research interest.

In order to evaluate *Liaozhai's* proper historical position, one must consider the problem from two perspectives: one vertical, namely, the relationship of *Liaozhai* to the preceding historical development of Chinese fiction; the other horizontal, or its relationship vis-à-vis works of fiction contemporary to it. In the past the former view has been given more attention at the expense of the latter.

Liaozhai has been considered as the epitome of fiction written in classical prose — an evaluation which holds quite true when one considers the style of language the author used and certain methods of expression he favoured. However, when one looks at the development of Chinese classical fiction in terms of both breadth and length, such an appraisal does not at all reveal the whole picture.

Chinese classical fiction had two developmental trends. One trend, writing using classical prose, began with the appearance of "tales of the supernatural" during the Six Dynasties period and reached its height with the "prose romances" of the Tang Dynasty. The other trend, writing using the vernacular, arose from the "storytellers' prompt-books" written using the popular language of the Tang and Song periods, which in turn eventually led to the development of the long, chaptered novel or romance. The line between the two trends was in general quite distinct, though there were certain exceptions to the rule, for example the chaptered romance written using classical prose. However, that is not to say the two trends never mixed, and indeed, during various historical periods the two exerted considerable influence on each other while competing with each other in popularity. From this angle, it is clear that the appearance of *Liaozhai* was not purely the result of a natural, smooth, direct process of development in classical-prose fiction.

Lu Xun, in his work *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, held that in *Liaozhai* Pu Songling's narratives of the tales of the supernatural "are concise and meticulous in the tradition of the Tang Dynasty stories", thus employing to best advantage the merits of the works of classical-prose fiction which preceded him. Therefore, Lu Xun placed the work in the category of works which, in his words, "emulated Six Dynasties and Tang fiction", thus correctly pointing out the work's

inspirational source in the works of the Jin and Tang. Pu Songling himself admitted in his preface to *Liaozhai*, "I have not the talent of Gan Bao, but I like collecting tales of the supernatural; and I share the tastes of Su Dongpo, who enjoyed hearing ghost stories." In this he consciously acknowledged his debt to the past tradition of fiction while forging ahead on the creative path which those before him had beaten. Yet the path he followed was a winding, uneven one; in retrospect, it was already branching away from the main road. He spent the major effort of his life treading that branch path into a smooth road, and erected unto himself in the process a commemorative plaque in history.

Pu Songling (1640-1715), whose other name was Liuxian, was a native of Zichuan (now Zibo), Shandong. When Pu wrote *Liaozhai* it was already removed in time from Gan Bao's *Records of Spirits* by over a thousand years, and by nearly a thousand years from the height of Tang prose romance. In terms of the development of classical-prose fiction, the appearance of *Liaozhai* was in fact an achievement at least equal to that of Han Yu, whose "Classical Prose Movement" was praised by Su Dongpo as having "resuscitated a tradition which had been in decline for eight generations".

According to Lu Xun, fiction in China in the strictest sense of the word did not begin to appear until the Tang. The "tales of the supernatural" which preceded its appearance not only involved mere crude synopses of plots, but also, more fundamentally, they were not consciously written as fiction. As Lu Xun put it, "the writers of that day believed that although the ways of mortals were not those of spirits, spirits nonetheless existed, and so they recorded tales of the supernatural in the same way as anecdotes about men and women, not viewing the former as fiction and the latter as fact." As an example, in *Records of Spirits*, the representative collection of the "tales of the supernatural", the author Gan Bao stated clearly that his creative stimulus was "to prove the existence of supernatural beings". Pu Songling deprecated his own talent as being unequal to the talent of Gan Bao, and insisted that he was only dabbling in collecting stories of the supernatural; however, in actuality it was nothing less than talent that led him to model his stories on the bold creativity of the Six Dynasties tales of the supernatural while creating his own extraordinary fantasy. He had no stake in proving the existence of spirits. In adopting some aspects of the "tales of the supernatural" and discarding others, he was able to avoid ludicrous blind imitation. The recording of strange and supernatural events and happenings by Six Dynasties scholars was not the same thing as propagating superstition.

In order to make an impression on the readers of their day they had to create in their stories an aura of truthfulness. In the course of living up to the demands of this kind of literary composition, writers during those days trained and developed their literary imagination. This was exactly the active element Pu Songling had learned from the supernatural tales.

Tang stories indeed may be characterized as possessing something of the unusualness of the Tang period, which gave rise to a large number of literary works. The authors of such well-known pieces as "Story of the Pillow", "The Eternal Grief", "Story of Li Ya", "Story of Yingying" and "The Governor of the Southern Tributary State" were mostly famous poets or essayists whose approach was to portray the lives of humans while paying much attention to plot and valuing diction. Through the roundabout permutations of their intricate plots they were able to give the reader a vivid impression of the characters and make those stories afford a marvellous spectacle; their skill was such that those of later generations who so painstakingly attempted to imitate them were left far behind. This achievement had much to do with the comparatively unfettered thought of Tang scholars and the relatively liberal customs prevailing in those times. "Prose romances" therefore reached their height only in the Tang, and from the Song Dynasty onwards steadily declined. There never again appeared works as famous as those written in the Tang, and the glorious age of classical prose fiction as epitomized by "tales of the supernatural" and "prose romances" passed.

There are many reasons for the decline of classical prose fiction. Although the appearance of Tang romances symbolized, as Lu Xun put it, "the beginning of consciously written fiction" and the true mounting of the literary stage by that genre, this did not by any means mean that fiction had attained its deserved literary status. The term "prose romance" itself originally had a negative connotation, and it could not compete on the same level with the magnificent Tang works of poetry or prose. Classical prose fiction of the Song and later, to use Lu Xun's words, "was flat and insipid... usually avoided contemporary topics and dealt with the past." Such stories "were neither good imitations of earlier works nor yet original tales". During this period, a new form of fiction was emerging from folk traditions which was written in the vernacular: "Storytellers' prompt-books" was born among the masses at the lower levels of society, and was created mostly for their consumption. The evolution of fiction from "storytellers' prompt-books" to full, chaptered novels was a process of several hundred years, during which time the latter gradually came to the

height of their prominence and influence. This process was very similar to the case of theatrical literature, which arose from popular sources to become an important symbol of the major achievement of the latter period of classical Chinese literature, when the status of verse increasingly appeared to take second place. Classical prose fiction of this period of history took a road quite different from that of vernacular fiction, distancing itself from real life and the great masses of common people and becoming a pastime only for the scholar elite. Thus did the brief works of scholars during the end of the Ming Dynasty fall behind the tides of the day and end up on a dead-end road. Ming classical prose fiction lacked the vitality of vernacular fiction and was unimaginably inferior to Tang stories.

The decline of classical fiction came to its lowest point during the Ming Dynasty. Lu Xun passes quickly over the period in his chapter on imitations of classical tales in the Qing Dynasty, feeling that negative aspects of the period far outweigh any positive ones. Although by the end of the Ming Dynasty it became immensely fashionable to write fiction in the style of "prose romance", there were very few works produced worthy of note. As for classical prose stories up to the late Qing, although in Lu Xun's words "such works consisted of strange tales of the supernatural, their purpose was to point a moral and educate men, and as such they were not really works of fiction." Classical prose fiction, having been reduced to this state, had finally come to be totally unworthy of its name.

Considering the prevailing atmosphere of decline of classical prose fiction during the Qing, how did Pu Songling's *Liaozhai* come to have such a tremendous impact when it burst on the literary scene, creating such a stir that even Pu's contemporary the great scholar Wang Shizhen didn't dare look down on the lowly country schoolteacher who was its author?

2

The impetus behind and purpose of Pu's creation of *Liaozhai* was not that of ordinary tales of the supernatural. Rather, Pu made use of methods of expression characteristic of "prose romance" and "tales of the supernatural" to express his long pent-up feelings of "solitary resentment" and to take a stand against contemporary society and the degeneration of classical prose fiction. The period in which Pu lived was a time of upheaval when immense changes were taking place. He lived through the last days of the Ming, the peasant rebellion led by Li Zicheng, the looting and repression of the local population by the

Qing Manchu troops and the popular resistance to the invaders during the early part of the Qing. After the Manchus had suppressed the opposition and consolidated their control over the country, Pu dreamed of getting a government post by participating in the system of imperial examinations. However, after having early shown some promise in passing the lowest examination, he was ever after repeatedly frustrated in his efforts to pass the higher examinations, and eventually only managed to gain the post of rural schoolteacher. Aside from serving a short while as a low-ranking assistant to an official in Jiangsu, Pu lived out the entirety of his life in the rural town of Zichuan in Shandong. Almost to the very end he held out hope that he would be promoted to an official post. However, the constant disappointment of this dream led this low-status petty intellectual to observe minutely and widely all aspects of the everyday social life which surrounded him. These observations produced in him spontaneous feelings of "solitary resentment", feelings which Pu then consciously expressed in his literary creation. What author during the development of classical prose fiction of the previous thousand years could compare in this with Pu Songling? The Tang romance writers were mostly famous scholars of high status; moreover, the birth of "prose romance" was linked with the custom in those days of a scholar presenting an example of his writing along with an appeal to an official or academic mentor for favours or consideration; in other words, the writing of this genre was actually a means by which one showed off one's skills and attracted someone's favourable notice. Why was it that Pu Songling considered *Liaozhai* to be the most important work of his life, though it could not even compare with a few "eight part essays"* in the imperial examinations as a means of obtaining an official post? Although he wrote in the style of "prose romance" and "tales of the supernatural", in his mind he did not necessarily follow in the footsteps of his predecessors. Rather, he modelled himself after Sima Qian, the founder of the tradition of *The Twenty-four Histories*. The fact that many of the tales in *Liaozhai* conclude with a broadly-ranging, philosophizing paragraph prefaced with the phrase "The chronicler of these wonders comments", which seems to be in imitation of frequent postscripts in Sima Qian's historical accounts which begin with the phrase, "The Grand Historian comments", cannot but lead one to conclude that Pu treated his stories as actual history. For this reason, Pu was head and shoulders above any of the earlier classical prose fic-

* A literary composition prescribed for the imperial civil service examinations, known for its rigidity of form and poverty of ideas.

tion writers. Of course, he did not understand the theories of history in images, but he did reflect in his stories the appearance of real history and in the process pointed out acute social problems.

Generally speaking, *Liaozhai* prominently raises several very important social problems. Pu Songling's descriptions of the government of his time highlighted its dark and cruel side and in particular exposed the corruption of middle- and lower-ranking feudal officials, who frequently conspired with evil members of the gentry to extort from and oppress the common people like a pack of ravenous wolves devouring the weak. In "Xi Fangping", a story which describes the frustrations the main character encounters level by bureaucratic level in his effort to lodge a legal appeal in the court of the king of Hell to redress a wrong done to his father, Pu brings together and exposes in a typical way the brutality of human relations in society and in the system of government officials. Pu Songling was an intelligent boy; though he failed in his numerous attempts to pass the official examinations, it was a long time before he gave up hope and woke up to reality. However, from this experience of repeated disappointment and from his broad observations of the mental state of intellectuals, he was able to see through the imperial examination system and recognize it as a trap for intellectuals. Not only was it impossible for intellectuals to fulfil the potential of their abilities under such a system, but to the contrary, the system served only to foster the worst sort of mediocre and incompetent good-for-nothings. In Pu Songling's eyes, the theory in feudal society that accomplished scholars should serve as officials was totally untenable and unrealistic, because the imperial examination hall had become a corrupt exchange, a farce where biased or incompetent judges presided over the passing of ignoramuses and the failing of geniuses. This explains the main reason behind Pu's having failed so many times to pass the higher-level examinations.

Pu Songling's stories also reflect from many angles the traditional oppression of women, such as the unfairness of marriages arranged by parents and the unhappiness and familial discord arising from the institution of multiple wives and concubines. Even more notable was Pu's creation of so many young women characters who vaguely thirsted for independence and freedom, such as Yingning, Qingfeng and others. Already in their fantasies these women take the first step to break out from their imprisonment under the feudal moral code and tentatively strike out in the direction of a new world.

Pu Songling broadly describes all manner of social life as though he were painting a canvas of local customs and habits. In particular, he excels in describing middle- and lower-class social life and rural people

and creating a gallery of varied and colourful human characters. The lower the class of the character and its life-style, the more the reader is impressed with the intimacy, liveliness, truthfulness, and simplicity of its portrayal. Such vivid description has much to do with Pu Songling's penetrating observations of rural life and simple appreciation of beauty. What other writer in the history of classical prose fiction can compare with Pu Songling when one considers the breadth to which *Liaozhai* reflects aspects of everyday social life, the importance of the social problems it points out, the variety of human characters which come to life in its pages, the great quantity of superb short stories it encompasses, the uniqueness of its artistic style, and the fact that the work represents the devotion of the major creative efforts of the author's life? Under the conditions of the pervasive degeneration of classical prose fiction in his time, Pu Songling in *Liaozhai* made a heroic effort to stem the tide and carry on the heritage of the excellent tradition of the past, while at the same time making new breakthroughs in the literary genre and creating a work which is the highest achievement of classical prose fiction. In this sense, it is not overstating it to say that Pu Songling is the most outstanding short story writer in Chinese literary history, for not only in classical prose fiction but even in short works of vernacular fiction, who is there who can surpass him? In his day even on the world literary scene there were very few who could come up to his stature. The great master of the short story Maupassant had not yet been born, and it would be more than 200 years until Chekhov would follow in Pu Songling's footsteps. With the exception of the great legendary oriental masterpiece *Arabian Nights*, I think *Liaozhai* could be put on a par with such famous works as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Cervantes' *Novelas Exemplares* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I speak in this way not at all by way of deliberate exaggeration so as to create a sensation. Rather, it is because the famous Western works I just mentioned, having been given impetus by a new historical tide led by short works of fiction, opened a new age in the history of Western fiction. Likewise, in China it was *Liaozhai* which was the leader in opening up a new era in the history of Chinese fiction.

3

As has been discussed above, it was mainly from three aspects that *Liaozhai* highlighted important social problems of the day. However, it was not only Pu Songling who recognized these urgent, acute social

problems. Philosophers and thinkers before and after him also were aware of them, as were later fiction writers, who gradually came to see such problems even more clearly. Thinkers and fiction writers separately but simultaneously found themselves taking note of these problems, and in the process a strong historical tide was formed. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they dissected the corruption which was a feature of the late period of the feudal society and wondered where it would lead. This was not an indulgence in wild fantasy on their part, but a reflection of the direct or roundabout perception in their minds of the objective development of society. To determine how accurately their perceptions reflected reality would require a case-by-case analysis. However, characterized as it was by common exploration by writers and thinkers, this historical tide of thought had a vanguard to which there were later successors. In the domain of fiction one must say that Pu Songling, as a writer of classical prose fiction, was at the vanguard of this tide of thought; its successors were the writers of vernacular novels Wu Jingzi and Cao Xueqin. This was the confluence of classical and vernacular fiction in the tide of thought. Therefore, to simply consider *Liaozhai* as the greatest example of classical prose fiction is to ignore the whole picture.

For years, when classical writers have been appraised, the term "limitations" has often been used to explain the phenomenon of complicated, contradictory thought. (I myself have not been entirely guiltless in this.) Thinking about it now, I realize that is a very incorrect concept; though the term is convenient to use, it oversimplifies the situation, to say nothing of being unconvincing. The development of history and the development of human cognitive ability are one single, endless flow; if one selected any section of that flow and looked at it in isolation, anyone would be affected by the limitations of contemporary conditions, as it is impossible to know the totality of the future. Though you may be the greatest person (this is relative too) in the world, you would still be under some limitations. If we look at the concept of "limitations" in this way, then it is entirely meaningless. How is it that two or even more persons would at the same time and under the same conditions have different understandings of the same thing? This too cannot be simply explained away by using the phrase "limitations of the time". Looking at the contribution to humanity of a thinker or writer, one doesn't demand that he have attained the level of those who came after him; rather, one looks to see what kind of new issue he has raised in comparison with those who preceded him, regardless of the fact that later generations will come to gain an ever deeper, ever more complete awareness of those issues. Still less

can one blame someone of an earlier generation for his "limitations". I feel the complexity of contradiction expressed in Pu Songling's *Liaozhai*, (here I won't speak of his other works) should be seen in the light of fiction writers who preceded him, as well as the fiction writers who followed him. Pu should be considered a link between the two, or as representing a transition — such would be a realistic evaluation of his place in history.

Pu Songling's investigations into aspects of the dark side of the society of his day were very profound, and it was with great fervour and full of indignation that he went about exposing them, to the extent that in some of his stories, such as "The Cricket", he even dared to include veiled criticisms exposing the evil-doing of the emperor. Such courage far surpassed that of previous classical prose fiction writers. However, Pu was even more familiar with the doings of middle- and lower-ranking government officials; therefore, he imagined an honest and upright official come to deliver the common people out of their dire straits. Many of the stories in *Liaozhai* which Pu starts off as tragedies but insists on concluding with an unrealistic happy ending are formed out of this fantasy. During the Kangxi period (1662-1723), especially during its middle and late years, corruption was rife, and with crooked officials to be found everywhere, how many truly upright and honest officials could there have been? Pu Songling not only could not know this, but he himself desired all along to become an official. Is this not a contradiction itself? Had he after all become an official, I don't believe Pu Songling would necessarily have had a spotless record or entirely unstained hands, if only because he dreamed about having high position and great wealth; again, this would have been contradictory to his fantasy of being an uncorrupted official. There were many who had a slightly better life than Pu Songling, and still more who had a harder life than he; yet by no means did all of them concern themselves with such social problems as he did. There were plenty of people in that age of prosperity who contented themselves with what they were, and in peace of mind left their fate to heaven. Pu Songling, however, exposed the festering boil which lay beneath that "age of prosperity", and denounced it on behalf of the lower classes; does this not show Pu Songling to be someone who dared to face reality? It is unfair to slap the criticism of "limitations" on him for his having been unable to fully recognize the weakness behind that "age of prosperity"; it is enough to understand the reasons why he was unable to recognize it. Pu Songling observed the system of government officials of his day from the viewpoint of lower-class rural society; therefore his observations have a rural simplicity and

gut-level directness. He didn't understand the ruling feudal upper classes, nor had he ever directly or indirectly experienced the political life of those classes. As an analogy, Pu's indignation and denunciation are exactly similar to the rural custom of decrying Heaven (fate) for personal misfortunes and general calamities, and the belief that if Heaven were only to open its eyes, there would be peace all over the land, officials would be honest and just, and harvests would be plentiful. Holding such a belief, Pu had hope for a change in his life of hardship — at least he might become a bit better-off and wouldn't have to work for Master Bi as a private tutor, lodging in the house of his employer. In the eyes of a landlord master, a private tutor was not much more than a poor and pedantic scholar — it was not an exalted occupation at all. Pu Songling could only go this far; it would be several generations later before a writer would go so far as to question the morality of the feudal institutions themselves.

The 18th-century writer Cao Xueqin continued on the road which Pu Songling had started. Cao's understanding of the social systems of his day went much deeper than Pu's, and thus he was able to respond to issues raised by Pu and on that foundation raise new ones. By Cao Xueqin's time the "age of prosperity" of Pu's day had become the declining last years of the dynasty. Cao therefore did not indulge in "decrying Heaven", having recognized that the feudal system itself was flawed and would have to be repaired. However, as he suggests in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, though Heaven (feudal society) may be patched up, it would still be basically flawed. A flawed Heaven is an imperfect Heaven. Therefore would it not be better to let the whole thing cave in and start afresh with a clean void? Cao Xueqin went that far, but neither he nor the fiction writers who followed him were able to answer the question of what new system should replace the old. That was left to history to tell.

Although the system of imperial examinations harmed intellectuals for several hundred years, there were very few writers in the history of fiction who suggested that it should be opposed. On the other hand, writers of fiction and drama produced a plethora of stories of individuals who passed the highest imperial examination and went on to gain fame and fortune. Pu Songling was the first to bring up and expose the dark side of the examination hall with its crooked practices. However he did not probe into the system deeply, only recognizing that such abuses were detrimental to men of talent. If the system could be rid of corruption, some scholars would surely pass the examinations; indeed, Pu himself long cherished the hope that he too would pass some day. This hope again represented a contradiction in his mind,

for even if the examinations were administered fairly, a passing score in them was no indication of talent. Wu Jingzi went a step ahead of Pu Songling when at the very beginning of his work *The Scholars* he came right out and condemned the system as unworkable, and even intellectuals who fairly passed the imperial exams as lacking real talent. Under Wu's pen, bogus scholars produced under the system of imperial examinations were vividly shown up for the contemptible figures that they were. Wu Jingzi himself had talent, but he had seen enough to thoroughly disillusion him and thus had no desire to compete for official rank. Free as he was of such an obsession, he was able to go much further in criticizing the system. Cao Xueqin was able to go even further than Wu Jingzi; he considered all those who craved official rank and honour to be no less than "traitors and profiteers". With cynicism born of utter despair, he saw clearly that if there was no hope even for the society which had produced the examination system, what good was it to have talent? Pu Songling was able only to create characters who despaired of this system; Wu Jingzi and Cao Xueqin created characters who were able to free themselves from that prison. However, the three faced the same system, and as such were comrades-in-arms on the same battle front.

Another point: although Pu Songling observed the whole range of ways in which women were oppressed under the feudal system, as soon as he sought a method to solve these problems, he found himself in a predicament, wanting to make concessions even in the case of the institution of multiple wives. The result thus could never be anything more than a change of form but not of content. While he had his stock of ideal characters, they existed only in his imagination and came out on paper only in the form of flower fairies and ghost foxes. Wu Jingzi not only exposed the brutality with which people treated each other under the feudal ethical code, but he dared to have his idealized character in *The Scholars*, Du Shaoqing, hold the hand of his woman friend of many years while they went sightseeing — something that was quite progressive, considering the strict separation of the sexes in those days. Wu's own conduct was unconventional and unrestrained, being affected to a much lesser extent by the bonds which fettered Pu Songling. Cao Xueqin did not merely in theory bravely challenge the traditional view of female inferiority, he praised females over males for their natural subtle genius. Moreover, he created realistic young men and women characters who strove for independence in choosing their marriage partners. Cao thus gradually lifted and cast aside the heavy curtain of the feudal moral code.

Of course, the similarities among *Liaozhai*, *The Scholars* and *A*

Dream of Red Mansions are not limited to the few mentioned here, nor are they so simple. However, a look at these few aspects is enough to show that the three authors were following the same road. If it can be said that the first high point to occur in the history of Chinese classical fiction was represented by the several long vernacular novels written during the Ming, then the second high point can be said to have occurred in the early Qing with the writing of *Liaozhai* in classical prose and *The Scholars* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* in the vernacular. The confluence of classical prose and the vernacular in writing pushed classical Chinese fiction to its last and highest stage.

4

It is easy to answer the question of why *Liaozhai* was so influential when one briefly looks at an overview of historical place of the work.

Liaozhai was written in classical prose, which had a limiting influence on its dissemination and influence. The key reason why the work, contrary to expectation, was widely popular and was able to overcome the obstacle of its difficult language, was due to its success as fiction, to its creation of vivid, inspiring characters, its reflection of new issues and new trends brought up by the historical situation of the time, all of which inspired an enthusiastic response in the minds of its readers. For this very reason the work was able to influence the later creation of fine arts, drama and folk art to the point that even to this day there are traditional storytellers who specialize in *Liaozhai* tales. Furthermore, the book has continued to enjoy a popularity such that it is widely known in almost every household in China, as well as being read and enjoyed in many foreign countries. Thus, to merely say that *Liaozhai*'s classical prose is simpler and easier to understand than the difficult classical language of an earlier period is not in itself sufficient to explain the work's wide popularity. None of the many works of vernacular fiction written before or after *Liaozhai* was as influential as the latter in spite of the former's language being much less difficult to understand. That some of those works of vernacular fiction have long since been forgotten shows that the type of language used to write fiction has nothing to do with a work's success or failure.

The above discussion has been necessary to clear up a long-standing misconception whereby *Liaozhai* is lumped together in the same school with works written during the wave of popularity which followed it. This, of course, is not appropriate.

In the wake of *Liaozhai*'s success there appeared a group of works

of fiction in the style of collected literary sketches such as *New Tales*, *The Storyteller's Clapper* and *Random Notes After Chatting at Night*. Some of these, while written in the style of *Liaozhai*, merely recorded miscellaneous local happenings; moreover, their authors did not dare address themselves to social problems, nor were they able to create interesting plots or moving characters. They had not the indignation or the movement; they were merely amusing themselves by playing at writing and had no interest in taking on the hardships of the common people. They departed from the spirit of *Liaozhai* and even were antagonized by it. It is just as with those many books claiming to continue *A Dream of Red Mansions* — how could they be considered to be in the same school?

One work which could be said to slightly contend with *Liaozhai* was *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage*, written during the Jiaqing period (1796-1821) by Ji Xiaolan, who hoped it would replace *Liaozhai* in popularity. Ji Xiaolan was chief editor of the great Qing encyclopaedic work *Si Ku Quan Shu*; however, his comments on Pu Songling show his weakness. Ji wrote: "A man of talent need not be a good fiction writer. . . . Tales which record things men have heard or seen should be pure narrative, not works of fantasy like plays on the stage. . . . Now Pu Songling gives a vivid picture of the smallest details down to amorous gestures and the secrets whispered between lovers. It would be unreasonable to assume that the writer experienced these things himself; but if he was describing what happened to others, how could he have known so much? This is hard to explain." Why should this be hard to explain? Ji was unable to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction! According to this view of his, other works of Chinese fiction such as long novels are even less understandable. If someone who doesn't understand fiction tries to write a book to replace a work of fiction which has been popular for a hundred years, it will be difficult for him to avoid failure. *Liaozhai* has therefore continued in popularity to this day, while *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage* is little seen or heard of today. As for certain later works much like it, they cannot even be said to be works of fiction and have even less to do with the likes of *Liaozhai*. Thus, in this sense, it would not be too far from the truth to say that in the system of classical prose fiction *Liaozhai* is a uniquely great work of unprecedented stature.

Translated by Daniel Cole

New Prints from Hangu

Wen Wu

Hangu prints have emerged as a new force in printmaking in recent years. Hangu is an industrial seaside district on the east edge of Tianjin. With its coastline and the Ji Canal crossing it, it has a sizeable sea salt production and developed chemical and fishing industries. In 1976 it suffered badly from the Tangshan earthquake but has recovered well, and the great changes that have occurred there since in the economy, culture and a generally more interesting lifestyle have provided abundant material for printmakers.

Hangu was home to a few printmakers in the early sixties, but it was not until numbers of young art students returned home there after graduation in the late seventies and began with enthusiasm to set up amateur printshops that the colony expanded, now numbering over forty, with an average age of thirty. The 1983 Beijing exhibition of prints from nearby Tanggu inspired the Hangu printmakers to strike out into new forms of their own, and some of their five hundred-odd recent works have been shown at national and international exhibitions, those in Beijing and Tianjin in the last two years having excited praise for their novel forms and lively flavour.

The most impressive character of these works is their artistic freshness, drawing boldly on folk art and foreign art to achieve an appealing

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expression of life. For instance, Zhang Fuyuan, a salt worker, has used characteristics of the folk papercut in his *Window*, where harvest home is portrayed succinctly but with warmth and brilliance through a pumpkin and a pair of child's tiger shoes on a windowsill and a batch of red peppers hanging in the window. The woodcut series *Chemical Symphony* by Shao Yajie, an artist in a chemical plant club, uses contrasting blocks of colour in the manner of modern art to depict the power of big industry. The watercolour block print *Dawn at the Saltern* by Hangu Cultural Centre head Wang Huanlai shows the flourishing salt industry and the tranquillity of dawn with straight lines and geometric forms. The librarian Xue Fushun's *Busy Fishing Village* is full of innocent simplicity in its vivid depiction of rowing boats bobbing on the sea.

Not only diverse forms but new materials are being explored, such as paper blocks, composite blocks and gauze-covered blocks, though still in the tentative stage. Hangu Cultural Centre artist Liu Shuchai's paper block from the series *Impressions of a Harbour* has a deep

solidity in its intersecting cargo ships and cranes that suggests symphonic praise of labour changing nature. Haihe River Radio Factory worker Cui Maoyuan's gauze-covered block *Gull* shows its subject soaring over the blue waves in an allegory of all-out progress. Hangu salt worker Lu Lianzi's composite block *Fishing Village* achieves a simple, three-dimensional intimacy with its viewer, and the same technique is crucial to the effect of *Window*.

These amateur artists are at the same time constructors of a new life. Brought up in Hangu, they have seen the changes there day by day and come to know the ideas, minds and pursuits of the local people, which of course are reflected in their work. A good example of this is *In the Breeze*, a paper block by Liu Zhenzhong of the Hangu Judicial Bureau, where a girl's yearning for life and the future is emphasized in the figure's posture and expression, quite apart from the picture's context, giving full play to the succinct simplicity and strong contrast of which print is capable to give deep meaning to a simple composition.

Translated by Wu Ling

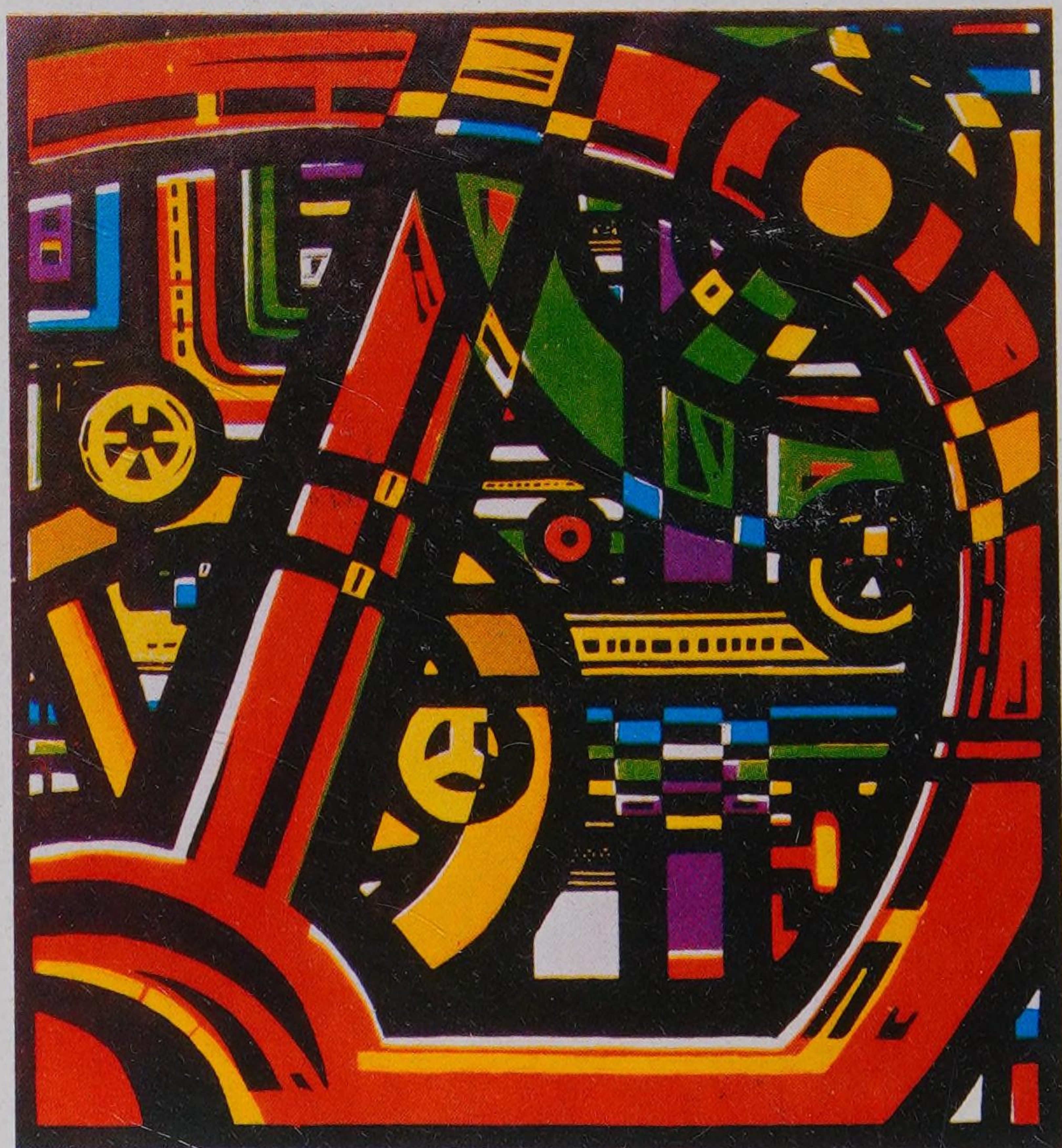


Window by Zhang Fuyuan

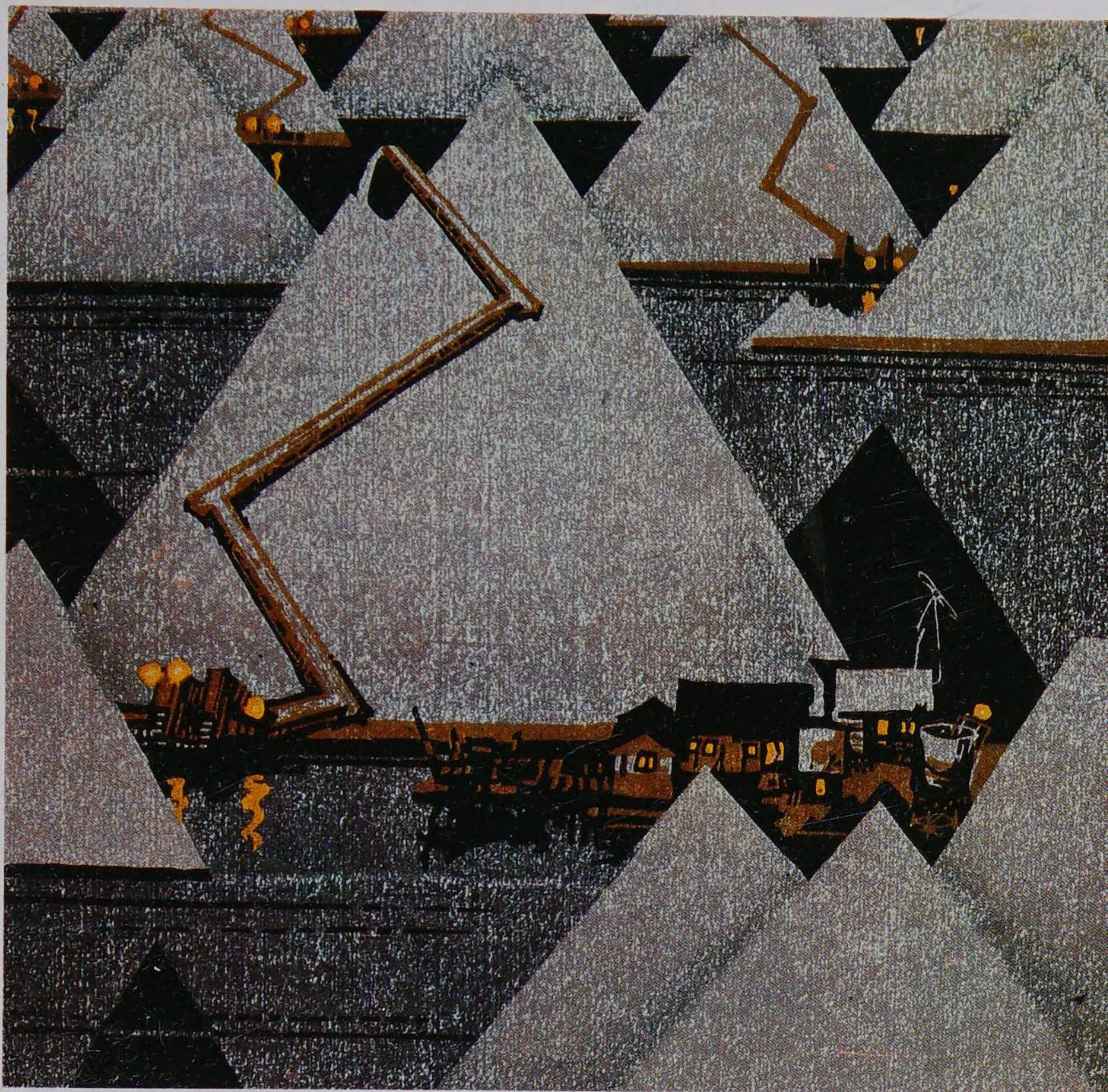
PRINTS FROM HANGU



In the Breeze by Liu Zhenzhong



Chemical Symphony by Shao Yajie



Dawn at the Saltern by Wang Huanlai



Fishing Village by Lu Lianzi



Gull by Cui Maoyuan

Liu Zhanqiu

Poems

The Rain Drives All Around

The rain drives all around
Does it mock or welcome?
It falls fast
Occupying all the land there is to roam
Leaving no crack for love

Oh but the happy rover
Has forgotten the world in the rain
His gazing eyes are drenched too
Till all the dust
Is washed clean away!

Short Lines on the Love of Snow

I

Are you loth to leave the sky
That you keep swirling so

2

A white gauze curtain
Lending earth obscurity

3

A lone floating leaf
A teardrop of yearning

4

Like a kiss melting into your lips
Like a dream hanging on your eyelashes

5

Not a shroud to bury autumn
But a New Year's card of longing to the spring

6

Not cruel like the hail not wanton like the rain
She is tender by nature

7

A jolly arhat
A child's rosy face

8

A maiden's cheek
Flushed with loving

9

Faded memories
Are warmed and moistened by a snowflake

10

Give it warmth
And it disappears

11

Only to the warmly dressed
Are snowflakes poetic

12

Their life vanishes
To moisten the green land

The Morning Glory

She lauds the summer day
Detains the evening breeze
On her lavender trumpet

Like maidens' lips
Like the grapes' glass
She intoxicates life

She climbs and stretches wilfully
On the thorny fence
With never a scar

The Sky

Blue as a limpid dream
Deep as unfathomable eyes

You carefree sky
Are the dimple of a maiden's smile

There the wind goes unchecked
The floating clouds are naked, full-figured
Thunder and lightning build resplendent palaces
Rain falls tenderly, demurely
Looking back, lingering, hesitating to leave

Untroubled year-round by ice and snow
By sand, smoke or dust
You are yet lonely
With no flowers or green grass
None of love's troubles and sweets

Like drifting duckweed
The stars wink eyes of night
Watching the fickle beauty of man's world
In impenetrable bewilderment

A Shower Drenching the Petals

A shower drenching the petals
Damp sweetness rising from the earth
Summer riding the bright rainbow
Beauty of swallows' wings shimmering on the ripples

A shower has disturbed my heart
Thundering faintly on the horizon
Memories like vapours evaporate
Moistening ardent illusions

My Light-hearted, Sorrowful Lines

My light-hearted, sorrowful lines
Have unveiled a world of reality, of warmth, of gentleness and
of beauty
Not built in the void of memory
But like a lively fish
Mute, yet blithe and free

I live, hoping others live better
Ripe fruits do not interfere with each other
Whenever in the dusk or at dawn
The soft melody of the mandolin
Caresses the hurt grass like dew

Beauty sprouts in the heart's depths
Only ugly faces are innate
There is no innate ugliness of the soul
Accept a warm-hearted glance
And we will live out our lives merrily

The Land of China

Do you know the mystic land
Where golden yearnings hidden lie
Scarlet and purple azalias in clusters bloom
The goddess sighs in the surge of Three Gorges
Winter comes from frozen soil to green coconut groves
And the rosy sea waves caress the sands

Do you know the mystic land
So beautiful the yellow skin and the black hair
With honesty like lakewater in the breeze

Bravery staunch as the Yangtse's thousand-mile sweep
Joy leaps under the frost-hung grapes
And the juncture of resurgence has burst forth from the hard nut

The Night Is Quiet

The night is quiet, the starry sky resplendent
The camellia breathes in the captivating azure
The tidewater still kisses the sands
The wind from the cliffs
Prays for the safety of ships at sea

I have left behind footprints dyed in moonlight
And cast a net into the ocean of the heart
To fish for understanding and joy
To fish for happy companionship
To fish for the lost, bewitching scenes of spring

Translated by Qiu Yiming

He Sings of the Joy of Life

Ji Cheng

Every rush hour in Beijing, a thin, middle-aged man wearing a peaked cap cycles through the huge current of bicycles, scanning its dynamism and nature for a flash of poetry. He is Liu Zhanqiu.

He was born in Wuhu, Anhui Province, in 1935. His grandfather and father were traditional Chinese doctors and his mother a primary school teacher. As his parents died early, he was brought up by his grandmother. He went to school at five and took to reading avidly. He had read *A Dream of Red Mansions* by the time he was eight and was on to Ba Jin in junior middle school and foreign literature in senior middle school. His favourite writers are Turgenev, Pushkin, Chekhov, Lorca, Mérimée, Tagore and Ba Jin.

He writes poems too. His first piece appeared in *Progressive Youth* magazine in the 50s. In order to read Pushkin and Chekhov in the original, he entered the Harbin Foreign Languages School to study Russian and became a translator in a factory in Shenyang after graduation. He was even a heat treatment worker for a time. But he has never stopped writing. In the late 50s and early 60s he published poems, essays, literary criticism, fiction, reportage and translations. Yet his early work was simple, even shallow.

Ji Cheng is on the staff of Chinese Literature.



Liu Zhanqiu

In 1977 he moved to the journal *Poetry* as an editor, and is now assistant chief editor.

The upsurge of literary retrospection in 1978 inspired Liu Zhanqiu to a period of exuberant creativity, and he has published four poetic anthologies *Lyricism and Reflection*, *The Joy of Life*, *Untitled Lyrics*, *Mankind, Love and Scenery*; three prose anthologies *For an Album of Early Spring*, *Warmth of Feeling*, and *Remote Guitar*; and an anthology of literary criticism called *Lyrical Melody*, as well as two translations *Lyrics by Yesenin* and *Lyrics by Pushkin*.

Most of his poems around 1978 look back to the chaotic 1966 to 1976 "cultural revolution".

In 1980 or thereabouts his poems changed, reflecting the new concepts or reform and opening to the world, with the concomitant breakout from isolation, interest in anything useful from abroad, confident social progress and changed thinking. Liu claims, "I have a new window again" ("My Window", 1981), from which he "stares with deep emotion at our changing country". He hopes his poems can clear up misunderstandings caused by artificial class struggle, so that a "gentle breeze takes away

all the quarrels for ever" ("A Dream of Green Shadow") and "warm feelings melt the ice still existing in our life" allowing people to "become honest, seek a happier life bravely and take the yoke off goodness" ("Preface to *The Joy of Life*"). In the *Last Response to the Curtain Call*, a short narrative poem written in 1983, he praised the thinking of a respected ballet dancer, who missed her prime because of the "cultural revolution". When she came back to the stage again to dance the lead in *Swan Lake*, she realized that since she was over thirty she was incompetent. In order not to let new dancers lose their prime, she gave up the leading role and joined the corps de ballet. After her farewell performance she became a ballet teacher. The poem reflects the regular replacement of the old by the new, when understanding and tolerance bridge the generation gap and three generations unite for a creative future instead of stubbornly opposing each other.

Since then, his poems have more deeply reflected harmony between people and between mankind and nature from a variety of angles. He has written many lyrics, "Summer" is typically indefinite, capable

of interpretation either as a depiction of summer's charms or as implying reform and a life of vitality.

Most of his poems depict life, love and scenery instead of major actual subjects and social problems and reflect the strong desire for change and the feelings of modern people. Of his lyrical style, he writes, "My Muse,/You tender maid,/Leave the warmth of the kiss and the cold of tears." ("My Muse"). His poems are like light music, free, bright, fresh and beautiful, connected perhaps with the beautiful rivers and lakes and the plain folk customs of his home town Wuhu, though one sees influences of the great lyricists, the fresh liveliness of Pushkin and the bright colours of Lorca.

He often discovers unexpected beauty and poetry in common things, as in "Morning Glories" in this issue:

She climbs and stretches wilfully
On the thorny fence
With never a scar

This is typically thought-provoking. His poems are plotted to take the reader into special circumstances, deriving meaning from ever greater symbolism so as to imply the realities of modern life.

His language is lyrical, fresh, fluent and very musical. He enjoys music immensely and has played the *huqin*, a two-stringed fiddle, since childhood, later learning the guitar and the piano. He has many musician friends and named a volume of poetry, *Remote Guitar*, after his favourite instrument. Poetry and music are harmoniously integrated in his work.

Liu Zhanqiu is a poet who sings of the joy of life.

Translated by Wu Ling

Pictures of the Four Demon Kings

In April, 1978, a storage vault on the third floor of the Ruiguang Pagoda south of Suzhou was found to contain over one hundred rare artefacts of the Tang (AD 618-907) and Song (960-1127) Dynasties, the most valuable of which was a pennant with pearl *Sariputra* (relic of the Buddha's bones) in wooden caskets. On the black-lacquered, rectangular outer casket was written in white lacquer "Pennant with pearl *Sariputra*, third floor of the pagoda of Ruiguang Monastery", and on the inner casket of ginkgo wood 124 by 42.5 cm. were painted the Four Demon Kings (Dhrtarastra, Virudhaka, Virupaksa and Dhanada), with the inscriptions inside "Eighteenth of the fourth month of the sixth year of the Dazhong Xiangfu Period" (1013) and "Tenth Lady Sun, wife of Military Commissioner Fang Yunsheng". The pagoda was built in the Dazhong Xiangfu Period (1008-1016) of the Northern Song Dynasty. According to custom, a new pagoda was consecrated with a forty-nine-day service, at which devotees would seek blessing, the most prominent of them donating a treasure to be secreted in the centre of the pagoda as a talisman. The pennant and its inner casket with the pictures of the Four Demon Kings were artworks of enormous value.

The Four Demon Kings and the Eight Devils were a usual theme for Buddhist murals and sculptures, usually placed on guard in a special hall at the entrance to a monastery. The Demon Kings on the casket were there to guard the relic in the pennant.

These rarities of Buddhist painting, vivid, strict in composition and

brightly coloured, are painted in different postures facing north, south, east and west, in a style similar to the trichrome glazed pottery warriors of the Tang Dynasty. Their waists bent slightly, their legs turned somewhat out, they have a military bearing typical of Tang painting. The Eight Devils under their feet are also vividly portrayed, not only balancing the composition but also setting off the bellicose pride of the Kings so as to add artistic interest.

The wind and clouds of the gods' heavenly home are captured in the streaming girdles and beards, drifting clouds and riot of petals, artistically exaggerated so as to bring out the strength of the Kings to the minutest detail. As defenders of the faith who can drive off evil and vanquish monsters, the Kings are portrayed with keen eyes, sinewy arms, warlike expressions and robust build, all of which combine to form an impression of might. The eyes are set off in azurite, the eyeballs painted in double lines with a dot of malachite in the centre surrounded by some light cinnabar and the eyebrows in clear brushwork, showing their keen gaze in all directions. Some fingers of Virudhaka's right hand are extended, some curved, not only making the fingers look more powerful but also harmonizing with the motion of the entire figure, enhancing its imposing militancy.

Technically, the brushwork inherits the tradition of the well-known Tang Dynasty painter Wu Daozi (c. 685-758), the figures executed in powerful brushstrokes in natural colours such as cinnabar, azurite, malachite and ochre, which remain bright after a thousand years. The colour application, unusual for religious figures, is Wu Daozi's method of adding a slight dye to opaque ink and leaving blank lines beside the ink ones. So, although blue, red, white and green colours all are used, they do not overshadow the bold ink lines, which stand out in clear contrast. Thus, a dimensional effect is achieved. The figures' faces are executed in light cinnabar, in a method similar to the particular style of Wu Daozi but different from the typical heavy colours of the high Tang.

Also unique is the painting's colour design. On bronze-coloured ginkgo wood, the colours, unless properly applied, would be murky and low-key. The painter has executed the Kings in cinnabar, malachite and white lead to bring them out in sharp relief against the bronze background. So, though the painting is dominated by red and green, it is far from being vulgar and clumsy. The discovery of this painting not only enriches the treasure-house of ancient Chinese painting but also provides valuable material for the study of Wu Daozi's style.

The painting's high artistry shows it to be by no ordinary painter. The lack of a signature is perhaps due to the religious subject. The picture was placed in the pagoda in 1013, and so must be earlier than that. From its brushwork and style it seems to date from the Five Dynasties (AD 907-960). It is in the Suzhou Museum in Jiangsu Province.

Translated by Niu Jin



Dhrtarastra

THE FOUR DEMON KINGS



Virupaksa



Virudhaka



Dhanada

The Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Literature

Chinese literature has undergone an obvious enrichment since the “cultural revolution”, whose impingement on life in general occasioned a process of all-round literary reflection, an unexpected result of ten years of chaos. Creativity has been reinstated, and the political angle of the seventeen years from Liberation to the “cultural revolution” has been abandoned. Writing is no longer merely education but art.

The founding of New China in 1949 radically altered literary trends. There existed then three groups of writers: Those of Yan'an and the other liberated areas, such as Zhao Shuli, Ding Ling, Liu Qing, Zhou Libo, Ma Feng, Kang Zhuo, Li Ji and He Jingzhi, who adapted easily to social change and continued writing. Of the next group, those who had contributed to the democratic revolution beginning in the twenties, some managed to remould their outlooks, while others left the literary arena. Though they had produced such masterpieces as *Dragon-beard Ditch*, *Teahouse* (*Chinese Literature*, No. 12, 1979), *Cai Wenji*, *Li Zicheng*, *Prince Valiant* (Vol. 1), on the whole they did not surpass their own earlier literary level. The third group of emergent writers had relatively few problems of transition. Thus writers of the first and third groups became the most active, though political vicissitudes within this contingent made for unsteady development.

The previous diversity of literary approaches was unified, becoming subservient to politics. Socialist realism, later tinged with revolutionary romanticism, became the only approved style, and the new hero figured in a plot revolving on the conflict of public and private interests. The social awareness involved was no doubt a step forward, and with the nationwide victory of 1949 the trend towards a social

theme even impelled some older writers to join the life of the masses. So concerned was this period with political developments that a literary survey of it would be a minute guide to the political movements of not only its own age but of the preceding century.

This socialist literature tended naturally towards the epic effect. In *Sixty Years of Storm* and *The Great Wave* Li Liuru and Li Jieren followed the social development of the republican period, Ouyang Shan's *The Talented New Generation* covered the whole revolution, and Liang Bin in *Keep the Red Flag Flying* and *Sowing the Flames* tried to show the awakened revolutionary fervour of the peasantry. Even *Red Crag*, far from epic in scope, is imbued with an epic heroism by its theme of the fight against counter-revolution on the eve of Liberation. Nor are social novels exempt. Liu Qing's *The Builders* follows the peasantry along the socialist road, while Zhou Erfu's *Morning in Shanghai* depicts the remoulding of the bourgeoisie.

This penchant for the epic was natural in a generation which lived through an eventful period, but the idealistic hero-figure, utilized constantly in various forms, became virtually indispensable. A concomitant feature was over-simplification of character along class lines. Despite a few striking images, fiction replaced personality with social class. Gone were the complexity and uncertainty of Ah Q. Separate schools ceased to exist except as differences of style or regional background, while subject matter increasingly concentrated on documenting successive political movements to the detriment of aesthetic enjoyment. Even the most influential pieces, like *Great Changes in the Mountains*, *Morning in Shanghai* and *Braving Wind and Waves* were necessarily imbued with a current-policy schema.

Little wonder, then, that the conflict between the concept of literature and actual literary practice became sharper by the day. Zhao Shuli once admitted that some of his works since 1957 were at best produced semi-automatically, and Liu Qing's *The Builders* is marred by its forcing of the internal conflicts between selfishness and altruism into the straitjacket of struggle between class and class. These two examples are by no means exceptional, and as the country fell under the control of the ultra-Left, the dilemma became all the more acute until to all intents and purposes literature ceased to have an independent existence as such.

The fall of the "gang of four" undammed the torrent. Writers concerned themselves again with the complex interrelationships of life in general, becoming by the same token more responsible to society. The first development was the bitterly introspective "wound literature", and despite a diversity of subject matter, the preoccupation

with exposing social ills harked back to the 1949-1966 period. "Wound literature" was by no means confined to the bewailing of personal tragedy during the "cultural revolution". "The Wound" (CL No. 3, 1977), "The Price", "What Can I Do?", "Memory" and "Expectation", for instance, point to the admirable qualities of ordinary people in the midst of their suffering; *Xu Mao and His Daughters* (CL Nos. 5 and 6, 1981), "The Music of the Forests" (CL No. 9, 1979), "Melody in a Dream" (CL No. 8, 1979), and "Romance in an Earthen Jail" eulogize personal defiance of dark forces; *The General's Lament*, "The General and the Small Town" (CL No. 6, 1980) and "The Bloodstained Magnolia" (CL No. 4, 1980) directly depict the chaos; "The Class Teacher" (CL No. 1, 1979) and "The Log Cabin Overgrown with Creepers" (CL No. 12, 1982) raise a range of social issues.

Hard on the heels of "wound literature" came "introspection literature", replacing the former's re-enactment of the tragedy with a profounder search for its causes and the lessons to be drawn from it. To this end it used a broader historical canvas, going back to the fifties and earlier, as in "The Legend of the Tianyun Mountains", which takes its cadre protagonist back to 1957. Wang Meng, in "The Bolshevik's Salute" and "Butterfly" (CL No. 1, 1981), synchronizes his characters' encounters with social ups and downs, much as Gao Xiaosheng's "Li Shunda Built Houses" chronicles a peasant's attempt to build his own house over three decades. The hero of the popular "The Convict Li Tongzhong" dies heroically refusing to carry out an ill-conceived rural policy.

"Introspection" at last cast aside class stereotypes in order to describe the complexities of personal relationships evolving in a much-changed society. Gu Hua's *A Small Town Called Hibiscus* does this in a pastoral setting; Fang Zhi's "The Traitor" follows a merchant through the period; Zhang Xianliang's "The Story of a Herdsman" (CL No. 6, 1982) discerns in the midst of suffering a human being's true worth; in "Lunar Eclipse" (CL No. 4, 1981) and *Baptism* Li Guowen and Wei Junyi explore individual alienation. Another thought-provoking aspect of "introspection" was the recognition that the rural dilemma continued right down to the conflict between the peasantry and the ultra-Left, harking back to the preoccupation of fifties works like Zhao Shuli's *Sanliwan Village*, Liu Qing's *The Builders* and Zhou Libo's *Great Changes in the Mountains*, so that the rural theme in fiction from Zhao Shuli's "Registration" (CL, 1952) down to Gao Xiaosheng's "Chen Huansheng's Contract" constitutes a contemporary history of the Chinese peasant.

Both "wounds" and "introspection" have passed their climax, and progress depends on their integration. Tearful accusations are no longer seen as desirable, and recent works like "My Faraway Qingpingwan" (CL No. 1, 1984), "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" (CL No. 5, 1983) and "The Chess Master" (CL No. 2, 1985) have turned to explore the relationship between the individual's fate and the epoch in which he lives, between historical tragedy and national history, culture and character. It is this combination that has ensured the success of *Mimosa* (CL No. 1, 1985) and "There Are Nineteen Graves in the Mountains".

Social reform seems set to become a new theme. Jiang Zilong's "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" (CL No. 2, 1980) has been widely read because of public interest in the subject. In "The Strife Within", Shui Yunxian has revealed the sharp contrast between the old and the new, which the hero risks his life to break down. Zhang Jie's *Leaden Wings* documents her characters' ideological, moral and spiritual bankruptcy in the wake of reform. Li Guowen's *Number Five Garden Street* has even addressed the momentous problem of political succession posed by reform. Yet these solemn themes are relieved by the reformists' typical firm faith, daring, farsightedness, objectivity and broadmindedness, and the trend in content is away from conflict and towards the characters' inner worlds, as in Jia Pingwa's "The Story of Xiaoyue Part One" and "Between Winter and Spring". The further emergence of multi-theme works is an indication that Chinese writing today is essentially healthy.

The foremost exponent of this psychological approach is Wang Meng, who has created an aesthetic unbound by time or space out of the souls of society's survivors, such as Zhang Siyuan in "The Butterfly", Yue Zhifeng in "Voices of Spring" (CL No. 1, 1982) and Song Zhaoyi in "The Wind on the Plateau" (CL No. 3, 1986). These are thoughtful types. Song Zhaoyi vindicates himself philosophically; Zhang Siyuan seeks historical truth from his own alienation; Yue Zhifeng, in the narrow security of the canning factory, dwells on his ill luck in the outside world. It is these asymmetries of space, leisure and luck that give Wang Meng's works their tension and unease as well as their contemporary psychological relevance.

Complexity of character is the keynote of the new fiction. Chen Huansheng is not just a diligent, thrifty peasant. His background of family debt, his adventure in the county town, his transfer to a purchasing job in a commune factory and his eventual signing of an agricultural production contract are woven into a multiple character who is patient enough to wait for a turn of luck, too honest to be highly

competitive, too trustful to avoid being made use of, too respectful of authority to complain, so incapable of nursing a grudge that he takes flattery as an uneasy favour even from officials who once insulted him for his debts, and comfortable enough with things as they are to fear reform and individual responsibility — in short a portrait of a downtrodden peasant lacking both status and initiative and so receptive to the most disparate ideas that one can imagine him accepting anything rather than forcing himself to think.

But there is a type of character that fights against fate and changes the world for people like Chen Huansheng. Shen Rong's "At Middle Age" (*CL No. 10, 1980*) shows such an intellectual, and Zhang Xianliang's "The Story of a Herdsman" shows another who sublimates the conflict of physical torture and spiritual refinement into a personal mental world. There is tragedy even under socialism, but the rebirth of beauty symbolizes human maturity, which is the strength of will to overcome obstructions.

Style has also become much more varied; witness Wang Meng's 1979 volteface into stream-of-consciousness writing, in which the psychology rather than the plot is central. The result is a more sensitive fiction within a pluralistic framework. Literature has broken away from politics to become, finally, one of the humanities. Indicative of this is a significant rejection of psychological description via a third person in favour of direct contact between character and reader. Even in Gao Xiaosheng's brand of realism the frame of the story is so broken up that as the plot progresses the mentality of the characters occupies the central role.

Point of view has diversified no less than style as established writers inject more personal reminiscence into their recent work. Zhang Xianliang has combined his own extraordinary life and the rough manners and simple customs of the wastelands; Liu Xinwu observes how Beijingers react to their history and the modern world; Feng Jicai has evolved the popular story tradition so as to mix legend, symbol and modern method in his latest work "The Miraculous Pig-tail" (*CL No. 1, 1986*); and Zhang Jie has brought her psychological acuity to bear on how people react to social reform.

The emergence of young writers has added to this diversity of approach, as they are in tune with the present tide of ideological emancipation. Zhang Chengzhi is a good representative in his sensitivity to history and the spirit of the times in "Rivers of the North" (in this issue) in which the contemporary quest is symbolized by the incessant search for the eternal river, and in "The Gallant Black Horse", where

the relationship of the sad Mongolian song of that name to the realities of life is explored down the generations.

Literature has experienced a rapid development from objectivity to three-dimensionality entailing a pursuit of ingenuity, aesthetic effect and variety of expression, and the sheer speed of historical change has offered a wealth of subject matter in awareness of worry, tragedy, recollection, reform, contemporaneity, open-mindedness, globality and history. There is a patriotism here quite alien to the spirit of the "cultural revolution": a concern for the fate of one's country linked to a consciousness of the historical path of literature, an omnidirectional, outgoing responsibility.

Proliferating theories of social consciousness, social psychology and social aesthetics have added their weight to the above trends by multiplying, as it were, geometric lines and planes upon what was unilinear and uniplanar, and the greater interest generated has resulted in an increase in the number of works written and published.

The new literature is still in its infancy, but the numbers of new writers coming to the fore and the transformation that they represent augur no small amount of hope for writing in China today.

Abridged and translated by Wu Mingshi

Shanghai International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature

The Shanghai International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature, held in November 1986, was a great success, according to Wang Meng, vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association. Quoting the praise given by Professor N.G. Malmquist of the Swedish Academy, Wang Meng said, "This has been the most effective and fruitful conference of sinologists ever."

While presiding over the fifth session of the fourth presidium of the Chinese Writers' Association, Wang Meng told reporters he had attended the international seminars on contemporary Chinese literature in New York and West Berlin in 1982 and 1985, but this was the first time such a seminar had been held in China. The Chinese Writers' Association played host, inviting scholars from various countries as well as Chinese writers to take part in the conference. More than seventy foreign scholars, forty well-known Chinese writers and thirty foreign and Chinese reporters attended. At the conference, scholars of all countries used Chinese language exclusively, a feature distinguishing this conference from previous ones. Many foreign scholars praised the spirit in which the conference was held, deeming the gathering together of such a large number of participants for an exchange of views and the opportunity to form friendships an unprecedented success. Many of the participants are famous scholars in their countries of origin, which include the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and many Western countries as well as the Soviet Union. Outside the conference, the foreign scholars had the opportunity to chat freely about literature with three generations of writers currently active on the Chinese literary scene.

Wang Meng expressed surprise that the points of view of Chinese



At the Shanghai International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature

and foreign scholars were not marked by national divisions. Many research topics were common to several parties, for instance:

Interest in “New Period” literature (i.e. literature since the “cultural revolution”) was widespread. The foreign scholars opined that its level was on a par with world literature in general, and that it marked a new historical period. Several remarked that it was only because of the language barrier that more readers around the world had not yet been exposed to Chinese literature; another set of scholars felt that readers abroad were interested in Chinese literature not so much for its literary value as for the light it shed on social problems. The latter were concerned that with the passage of time this aspect of today’s literature will gradually lose its validity. Another group of scholars expressed concern over the tendency of some Chinese writers to move away from realism. They praised Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye’s *Chinese Profiles* for its having brought to the ears of the world the true voice of the common Chinese people in the midst of the current reforms.

The question of the relation of the development of the arts in China to current global trends also captured the interest of many of the participants, some of whom said that Chinese writers should discard simplistic depictions of struggles between characters and broaden their subject matter, turning their gaze towards industrial civilization, environmental pollution, world peace and other subjects concerning all of humanity. Other scholars, however, emphasized that Chinese

writers' first audience is the Chinese people and that there is no reason to place undue emphasis on the opinions of foreigners; moreover, writers who are bent on following literary fashions will never become literary giants. The Nobel Prize for Literature is not the be-all and end-all of international prizes, these scholars said.

Realism was another question widely discussed at the conference. Some Sinologists held that realism provides a deeply sympathetic portrait of those at the lowest levels of society, maintains an attitude of cool analysis towards society and uses unadorned, easily accessible language which gives it enduring power; all these features have helped it maintain international popularity up to the present. Another group, however, felt that the true sign of China's entry into a new period would be a distancing from realism, the creation of a unique world of linguistic art and a breaking free from the old limitations imposed by realism in the past.

Speaking to reporters, Wang Meng noted with interest that many Sinologists had spoken from unique angles, expressing opinions which at first seemed strange but which were in fact quite meaningful and which enriched and broadened the thoughts on literature of all participants. Michael Kahn-Ackermann of West Germany delivered a paper entitled "The Advantages of Misunderstanding" in which he opined that while because foreign scholars' social conditions, cultural environment and ways of thinking differ from those of Chinese authors, causing them to formulate interpretations of the authors' works entirely different from those of the authors themselves, such creative "misunderstandings" in the course of research on literary creation and theory are much more valuable than a simple parity of opinion. Ackermann's theory caught the interest of many participants at the conference. The Soviet Sinologist Boris L. Rifkin made a thorough and detailed analysis of the use in contemporary Chinese novels of traditional literary devices from classical Chinese novels, which even surpassed in certain aspects the work of his Chinese colleagues.

The English Sinologist W.J.F. Jenner told the Chinese writers at the conference he hoped they would write pieces that were not so long and so numerous. Wang Meng responded: "This is an honest piece of advice offered in the spirit of friendship." Jenner recommended that the system of recompense for manuscripts be reformed with a view to improving the quality of literary works. If a writer compresses a ten thousand-character manuscript to seven thousand characters and thus improves its quality, he should be paid at the rate for ten thousand characters plus a bonus for having edited out

three thousand characters. This proposal was greeted with thunderous applause.

Wang Meng noted with satisfaction that Chinese authors had maintained their efforts to create a democratic, harmonious atmosphere for scholarly research and discussion, and that this international conference, through the joint efforts of scholars from many countries, had made their wishes a reality. Moreover, this atmosphere had been expanded to include exchanges between Sinologists from many lands. Although debate was fierce among scholars of literature from the various countries because of their differing artistic viewpoints and literary ideas, they were all able to air their views in a spirit of friendliness and mutual respect, stimulating their intellects while building friendship.

Wang Meng summarized the conference's mood of spirited warmth with the following words: "Happiness reigned."

Translated by Stephen Fleming

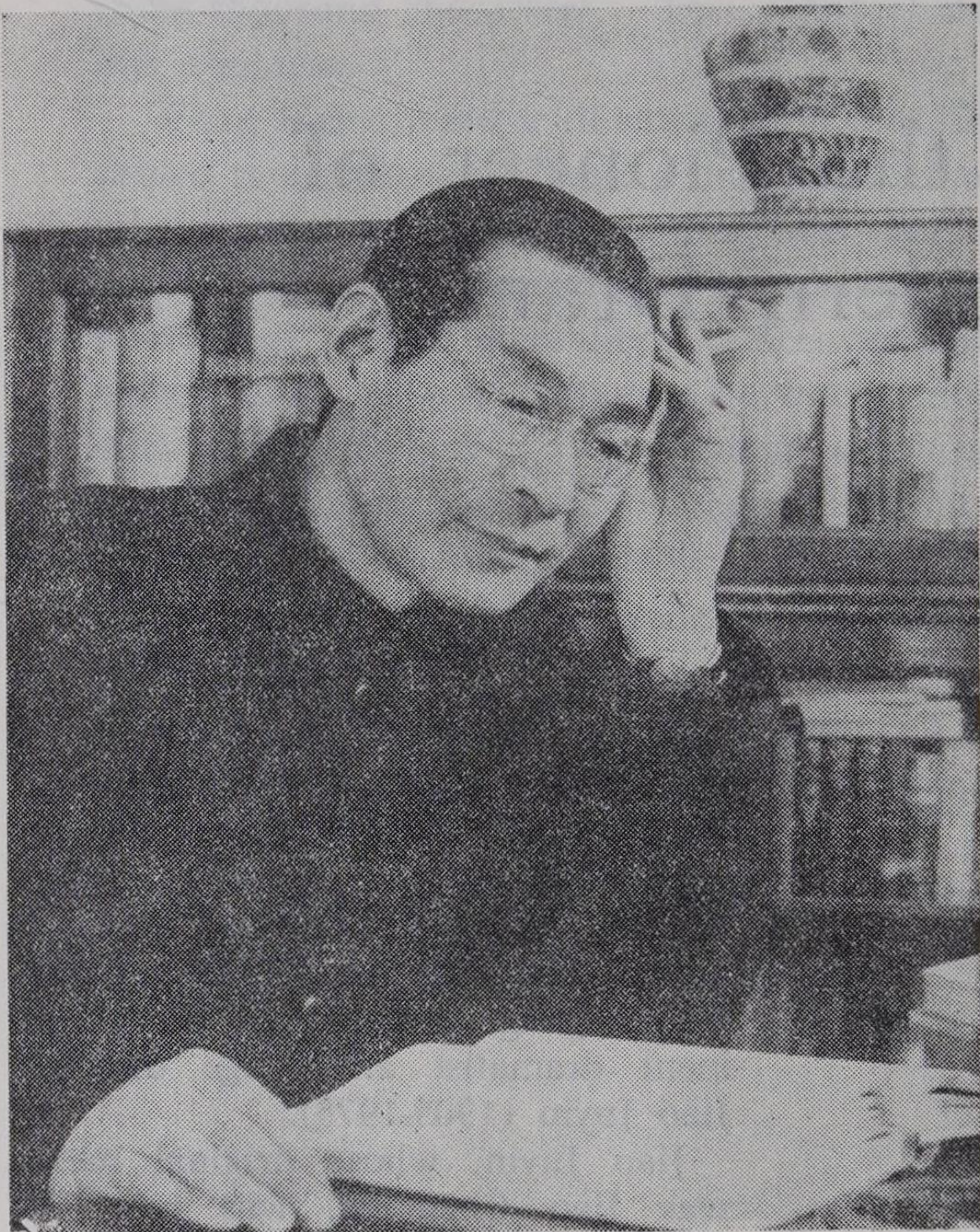
Jiao Juyin, the Pioneer of Chinese Modern Drama

Liang Bingkun

After the art of modern drama was introduced into China at the beginning of this century, many Chinese dramatists worked hard to adapt this alien art form for the Chinese stage, among them the prominent dramatist and stage director Jiao Juyin (1905-1975).

Jiao Juyin, whose original name was Jiao Chengzhi, was born in Tianjin and led a poor life from childhood. He left school several times as his family was too poor to support him. When he was in primary and middle school, the May 4th New Cultural Movement broke out and Western drama began to come to China, called "new drama" or "civilized drama" to distinguish it from traditional Chinese opera. Nankai Middle School was then very active in developing the new drama in Tianjin, and its students organized themselves into drama societies and performed new plays to fight against the oppression of imperialism and feudalism. Influenced by this new social trend, Jiao became an ardent lover of this art, acting in several plays and adopting the stage name Jiao Juyin. In 1924 he finished his second year in the senior class of Huiwen Middle School in Tianjin,

Liang Bingkun is a playwright at the Beijing People's Art Theatre.



Jiao Juyin

graduated a year early because of his remarkable intelligence and was recommended for entrance to Yanjing University in Beiping. While studying there, he used his spare time to write, translate and teach to earn his tuition and living expenses, and because he loved modern drama, he often took part in the activities organized by student drama societies and translated many foreign plays into Chinese, some by Molière and Goldoni. Although he had not decided to make drama his career at that time, he was unconsciously already deeply involved in it.

Jiao Juyin began his academic career with the study of Chinese traditional opera in 1930 when he was the president of the Beijing Opera School in Beiping. He was only 25 and had never systematically

studied local operas. In the eyes of the professionals he was but a layman. But to run his school well he determined to master it and began first to study Beijing opera under experienced performers, whose various styles he noted while he researched the origin and evolution of Beijing and other Chinese operas. This gave him a good grounding in traditional Chinese operas. Traditionally local opera teachers took on students as apprentices and taught them orally. Jiao Juyin reinforced this by stipulating that students should also study Chinese language, foreign languages, art theory, Chinese literature, Chinese and foreign drama histories, music, painting and martial arts. He did away with many feudal conventions and recruited female students, which was unusual at that

time. He also revolutionized some singing styles. All this may seem easy and logical today, but in the 20s and 30s it was difficult and risky.

In 1935 Jiao Juyin left Beiping for France and entered Paris University to read for a doctorate in literature. Study of Western drama broadened his vision, and in the meantime he systematized the data he had collected to deepen his understanding of traditional Chinese drama. He took his degree in 1938, and his thesis "Traditional Chinese Opera Today" was published by Trophée in the series *World Drama*. In it he expounded the development and character of Beijing opera as well as the educational system and prospects of traditional Chinese opera in the 1930s, while at the same time detailing how modern drama was developing in China.

His plan to stay in Paris was overtaken by the outbreak in the Far East of the Second World War, and declining an invitation to teach in Paris and Switzerland he hurriedly embarked for home in January, 1938.

At that time Beiping and Shanghai were already occupied by the Japanese, and Jiao had to travel via Hongkong to Sichuan, where in the early 1940s he became head of drama at the National Drama School in Jiang'an and directed the graduates in *Hamlet*, which he adapted to the patriotic needs of the moment. The première caused a sensation in the neighbouring counties, and people came from far away by boat to see the play, a tribute to his first experiment.

After less than a year in Jiang'an, Jiao went to Chongqing to translate the Soviet reformist playwright Danrenko's *Memoirs*, Chekhov's

Selected Dramatic Works, Zola's novel *Nana* and several works from Hungary. He not only faithfully interpreted the originals but developed his intelligence as a dramatist by exploring the realism of foreign drama. "My stagecraft is still very naive," he later said, "but Chekhov has opened my eyes and shown me the road to take."

Poor and professionally unknown, Jiao concentrated on dramatic content and theory. A year after the defeat of Japan in 1945, he returned to Beiping as the dean of the English department of Beiping Normal University. Though in a different job, his interest in drama remained unchanged. A company invited him to direct *Night Inn*, an adaptation of Gorki's *Lower Depths*, and he gladly accepted.

Night Inn worked well in a Chinese setting as a vivid cross-section of life and feelings in the dregs of society, though it had no particularly complicated plot.

It was good practice in the Stanislavsky system, aiming not at reality for reality's sake but social significance. It was also his first critical success as a director.

However, it was only after the founding of the People's Republic that Jiao Juyin was recognized as an established director, because the new society provided the conditions for him to develop his talents. When the People's Art Theatre was set up in early 1950, he was invited to direct Lao She's new play *Dragon-beard Ditch*. The 1951 première was a hit, and the following year Jiao was appointed its vice-president and director of the People's Art Theatre. A turning point in his career, Danrenko's *Memoirs* had given him the idea of a Chinese equivalent of the Moscow Art

Theatre, and now there was one, somewhere to realize his ambitions.

In the subsequent twenty years Jiao Juyin established a directing school in his own style and evolved a systematic and penetrating theory. His directing successes included *Dragon-beard Ditch*, *Teahouse*, *The Tiger-shaped Tally*, *Cai Wenji*, *Wu Zetian*, *Three Yuan of National Money* and *Guan Hanqing*.

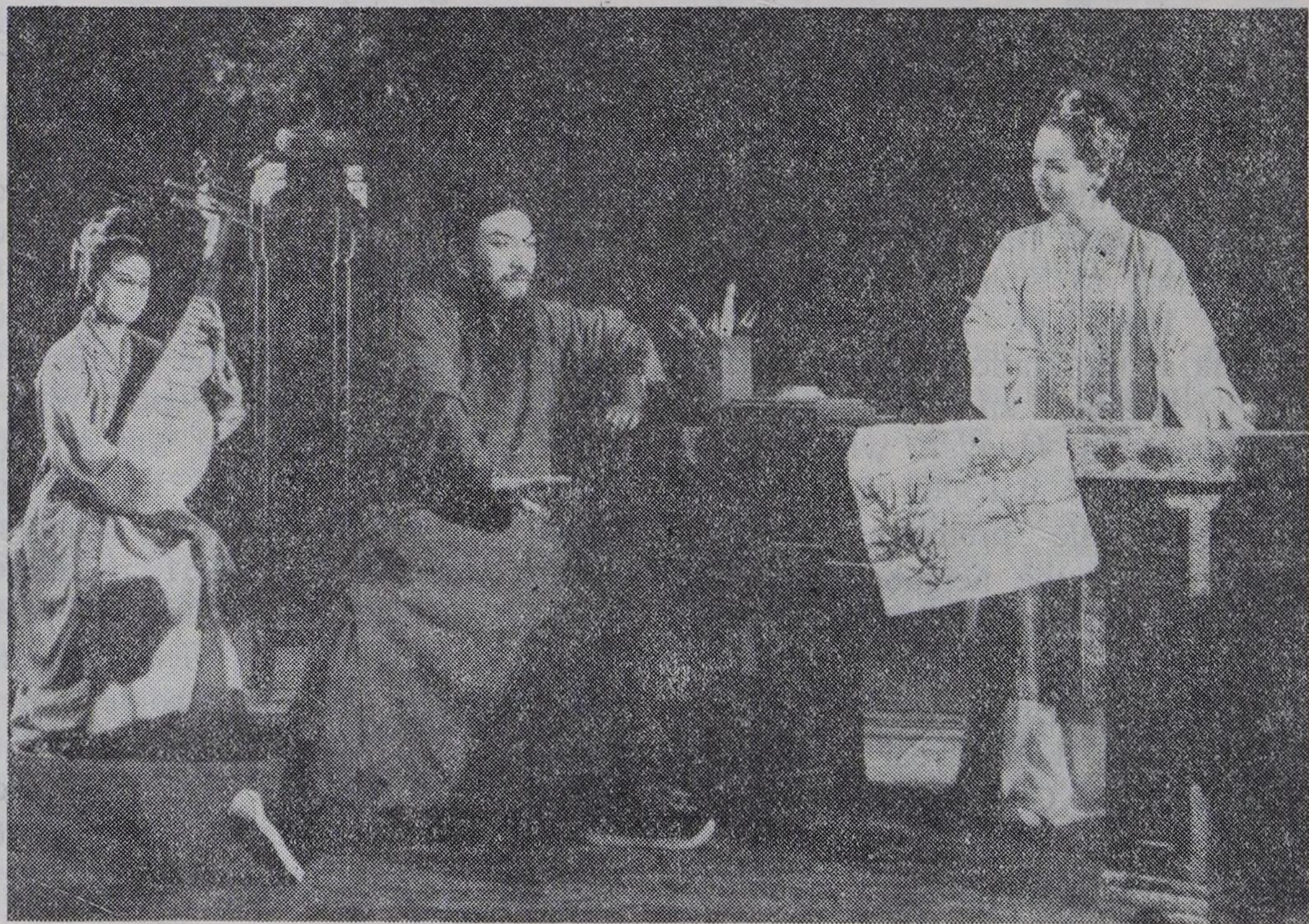
He saw the need to adapt Stanislavsky's ideas to the portrayal of Chinese life and succeeded in this in *Night Inn* and *Dragon-beard Ditch*. In cardinal artistic principles, he maintained, there was little to choose between Stanislavsky, Western drama and Chinese opera, all of which could draw on the others.

He introduced traditional opera technique into modern drama in Guo Moruo's historical play *The Tiger-shaped Tally* in 1956, not to

transform modern drama but to enrich it. "Assimilate the forms of traditional opera," he said, "then forget them." He speeded up the action by using the stylized movements, percussion accompaniment and long-sleeved costumes of Beijing opera and demanded "non-objective traditional acting" to stimulate the audience's imagination. Operatic language dramatized daily life, and traditional scenery broke the limitations of time and space of modern drama.

Although this experiment did not reach the goal he had expected in some aspects, Jiao Juyin became more certain that the nationalization of modern drama could be realized and that modern drama would form its own style as long as it drew elements from the form and style of traditional opera in the course of its development. To achieve this, he

Guan Hanqing



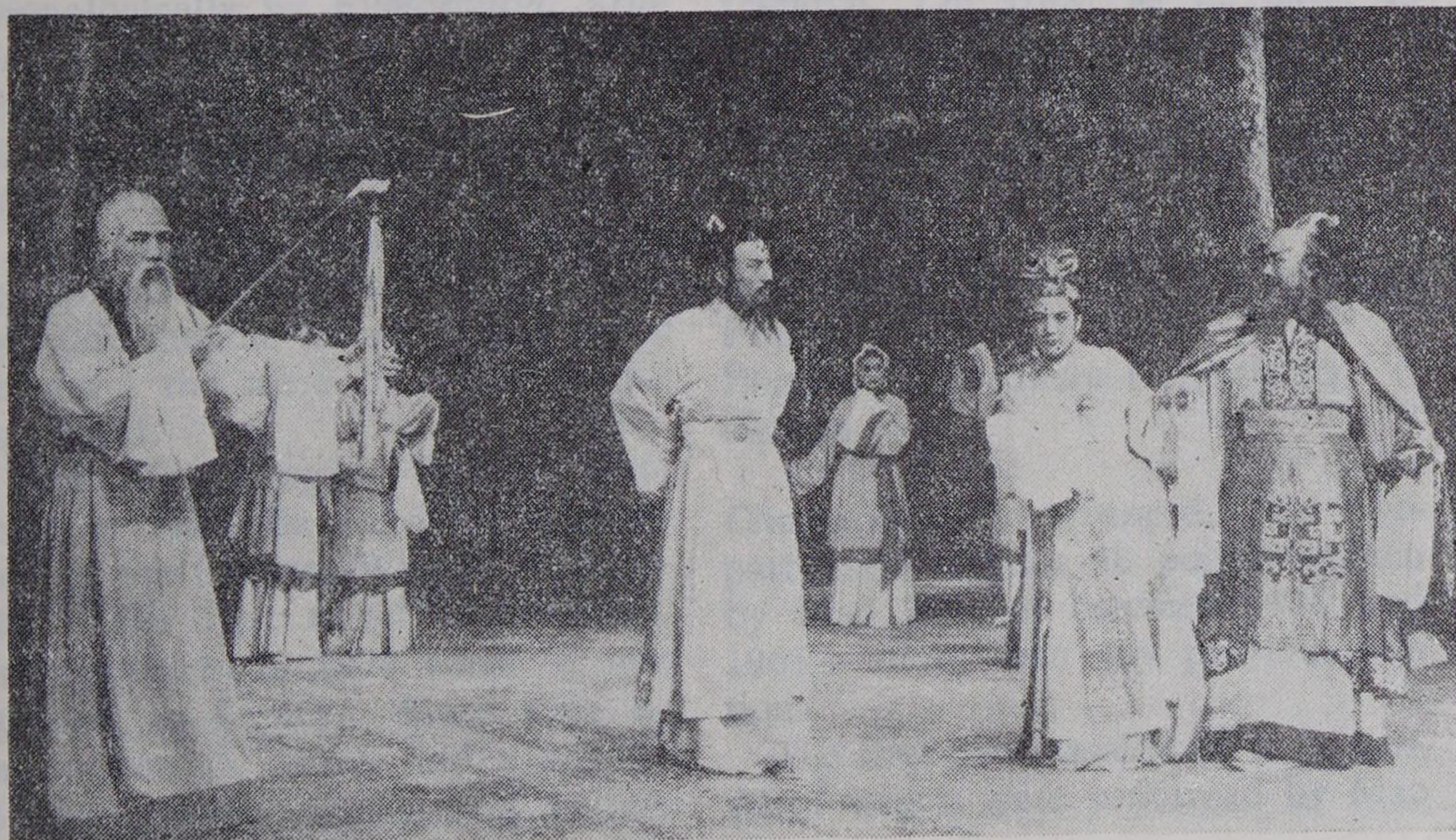
experimented not only with historical plays but also with plays on modern themes.

In 1957 the Beijing People's Art Theatre decided to stage *Teahouse*, a new play by Lao She, and Jiao Juyin cooperated a second time with the author of the successful *Dragon-beard Ditch*. Lao She believed that Jiao deeply understood his play, and Jiao Juyin loved Lao She's style. This mutual understanding brought about a meeting of minds. In *The Tiger-shaped Tally* Jiao Juyin had only tried to draw on the spirit and form of traditional opera for modern drama, but when he began to produce *Teahouse* he tried to put the spirit of traditional opera into practice, demanding fidelity of form and spirit in characterization by concise "acting with language", as he liked to put it. He also adapted the "liangxiang" posing whereby traditional opera symbolized emotion. In *Teahouse* Jiao Juyin succeeded in making the movements of the characters logical and unique, pro-

ducing excellent stage effects, refining what he had done in *The Tiger-shaped Tally* so as to enrich and develop the performance of modern drama and create a new stage art with a strong national style.

After many years of painstaking exploration and practice, Jiao Juyin's work to nationalize modern drama entered a new period, during which he directed many plays, including *Cai Wenji*, another historical play by Guo Moruo, about the story of the Han Dynasty poetess Cai Yan, who wandered destitute among the Huns and finally returned home during a war. In directing this play, Jiao Juyin tried to "depict life through art", emphasizing the use of resemblance in form to achieve resemblance in spirit and set off the acting and characters. At the same time, he took over the artistic expression and aesthetic principles of traditional opera and certain aspects of Western stage design, refined them and applied them to the en-

The Tiger-shaped Tally



hancement of the stage environment. Thus the staging of *Cai Wenji* achieved a perfect unity of stagecraft and performance and fully brought out the innermost thoughts of the characters, causing a sensation in Beijing. "Out of my materials for a little hut," the author Guo Moruo remarked, "you have built a hall of art." And Wu Zuoren, a well-known painter, said, "The staging of *Cai Wenji* rivals the Song Dynasty painting *Wenji Returns to the Han*."

In the early 1950s, when Jiao Juyin directed *Dragon-beard Ditch*, his artistic target was "a slice of life" on stage; he stressed the abolition of conscious performing, demanding truthful portrayal of life; his guideline during this period was still Stanislavsky. After 1956, when he directed *The Tiger-shaped Tally*, he turned his aesthetic attention to a national performing system, preferring to break down natural forms. By the time he directed *Teahouse*, he was saying clearly that "a slice of life" on stage did not equal dramatic art, and that what the audience wanted to see was "acting", with a frank admission that the stage was a place

to act. He had developed his theatrical concepts to a theory that "drama is an art jointly created by its admirers and its executants".

Jiao Juyin's exploration and creation of modern drama drew attention abroad. The Beijing People's Art Theatre's productions of *Teahouse* in Europe, Japan and Hongkong in 1980, 1982 and 1986 were like "a state treasure" and "a wonder of Far Eastern drama", where "direction follows neither Stanislavsky nor the modernists but Chinese tradition."

Jiao Juyin's success in forming a unique directing school came from his encyclopaedic knowledge. He was constantly perfecting his art, never sticking to old ways. From each play he directed, he got new ideas and innovations. While adopting the strengths of foreign drama, he always strove to create things essentially Chinese, and it was this which brought him success in forming his own unique directing school with its distinctive style.

Translated by Xiong Zhenru

Publishing News

Random Thoughts

Ba Jin

People's Literature Publishing House

The last volume of *Random Thoughts*, a work in five volumes by Ba Jin, China's leading writer, was published by the People's Literature Publishing House last December, winding up the 420,000-word work, which consists of 150 prose pieces and essays. Ba Jin has said that this will be his last work.

The work was written during an illness from 1978 to 1986 and named after the first volume *Random Thoughts*, which was followed chronologically by *Exploration*, *True Words*, *In Illness* and *Untitled*. The whole collection was published by the Joint Publishing Co. at the beginning of 1987.

Its publication has had great repercussions in literary circles. Critics conclude that its influence and value transcend the mere book and literature itself.

Born in Chengdu, Sichuan Province in 1904, Ba Jin is now chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association. His first novel, *Destruction*, was published in 1928 when he was studying in France. Since then he has written six novels and a number of short stories, essays and feature

articles, which brought him the Italian Dante Alighieri International Award in 1982.

On the Composition of Character

Liu Zaifu

Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House

This provocative new work by one of China's best-known literary and artistic theorists is a reworking of recent controversial essays emphasizing the relationship between man and literature, which he sees as a "second universe".

In this book, the fruit of six years' research, Liu tries, as he says, to avoid the common drawbacks of the Chinese social sciences: lack of creativity and conceptual system.

Selections from Mao Zedong's Poetry

People's Literature Publishing House

Chronologically arranged, this two-part book collects 50 poems written by Mao Zedong between 1918 and 1965—more than any previous edition.

The first part consists of 42 poems, 39 of which were proofread by Mao

himself and published before his death on September 9, 1976. The other three were published posthumously.

The second part has eight poems which are not final versions by the late leader, who did not want most of them published, but which are either widely read or instructive. Among these, "Reply to Mr Liu Yazhi — to the Tune of Huan Xi Sha" and "Jinggang Mountains — to the Tune of Nian Nu Jiao" appear here for the first time in print. An appendix contains three of Mao's letters on poetry.

Notes on Lao She

Hu Jieqing and Shu Yi
October Literature and Art
Publishing House

To mark the 20th anniversary of Lao She's death, October Literature and Art Publishing House has published this collection of pieces about him by his widow Hu Jieqing and his son Shu Yi, providing many details on Lao She's birthplace, his childhood and its close connection with Beijing.

Books in Memory of Lu Xun

To mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Lu Xun, the Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House has published *Manuscripts of Ancient Books Proofread by Lu Xun*, consisting of 40 manuscripts edited by him.

The Antiquities Publishing House has published *Complete Manuscripts of Lu Xun*, co-edited with the Lu Xun Museum in Beijing, containing

letters, diaries and articles.

The Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House has published *Lu Xun's Collection of Reproductions of Han Dynasty Carvings*, containing 200 pieces, unpublished during the author's lifetime.

The Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House has published *Lu Xun's Second Edition of "Stone Pictures of the Universe"* and *Lu Xun's Manuscripts on Carved Stones*, both printed for the first time.

The People's Fine Arts Publishing House has published *Picking Flowers*, a collection of 120 Russian prints which Lu Xun failed to print during his lifetime.

The Culture and Art Publishing House has published *A Collection of Essays on Lu Xun* by Tang Tao, a well-known contemporary literary critic. The four-part book is a comprehensive study of Lu Xun.

Catalogue of Rare Ancient Chinese Books

Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House

This is the most comprehensive and systematic large reference book of its kind so far. With more than 50,000 entries covering some 130,000 rare books in libraries, museums and colleges all over the country, it will be most useful for foreign Sino-logists and others interested in the history of Chinese culture.

Research on "Chu Ci" Poetry

Hubei People's publishing House

This large academic volume is in

five parts: "Footnotes on *Chu Ci* Poetry"; "Definitions of Main Publications on *Chu Ci* Poetry"; "Criticism of *Chu Ci* Poetry"; "Research Essays on *Chu Ci* Poetry"; and "Overseas works on *Chu Ci* Poetry".

Chu Ci is a collection of 17 poems by Qu Yuan, Song Yu and others written in the fourth and third centuries BC.

Lives of a Hundred Traditional Chinese Painters Commercial Press

This collection of biographies of traditional painters working under the People's Republic, published by the Commercial Press's Hongkong Branch for worldwide distribution, contains 200,000 words with photos of and works by each, starting with Qi Baishi, born in 1863.

Complete Works of Zhu Guang-qian

Anhui Educational Press

This work has been in serial publication since early last year. Its 20 volumes contain all the writings, translations and correspondence of the scholar and aesthete (1897-1986). *Selected Works of Zhu Guangqian* is published by the same house.

Biography of Hu Shi

Bai Ji'an

Hunan Educational Press

Bai Ji'an's objective description of the achievements and imperfections of the great scholar of education, literature and art Hu Shi (1891-1962) will be a very useful reference book for readers interested in the modern history of Chinese culture and scholarship.

Cultural News

Symposium on Contemporary Literature

A symposium sponsored by the Literature Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was held in September, 1986 in Beijing. More than two hundred noted literary theorists and critics from 24 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions attended.

Liu Zaifu, head of the Institute, made an opening speech entitled "The Main Current of Contemporary Literature". Animated discussions took place, and all agreed that great progress had been made from 1976 to 1986 in content, range of subject-matter and technique, comparable with that of the 1919 New Culture Movement.

Wang Meng, Minister of Culture, addressed the symposium.

Participants included well-known figures in the literary field such as Qian Zhongshu, Zhang Guangnian, Chen Huangmei and Tang Dacheng.

Beijing International Book Fair

The Beijing International Book Fair, organized by the China National Publications Import and Export Corporation, was held in September,

1986 at the Beijing Exhibition Centre. This was the first book fair of its kind ever held in Beijing. On display were about 50,000 titles from 1,000 publishing houses in 35 countries and regions, covering a wide range of subjects including natural science, engineering, technology and social sciences. It was decided that such an international book fair would be held in Beijing every two years.

Seminar on Fable Literature

The seminar on fable literature, organized by the Chinese Fable Literature Research Association, was held in Beijing last August. More than 60 fable writers attended. Shao Hua, member of the secretariat of the Chinese Writers' Association and vice-president of the Chinese Fable Literature Research Association, pointed out that the many fables written in the past years lacked depth, satire and imagination, and that no fable without romanticism and absurdity had artistic charm. All participants held that new ideas must constantly be brought into the writing of fables and that new forms like the fable novel, fable drama and fable cartoon films must be further promoted.

Early Painting Found

A painting which is believed to date back 5,000 years was discovered by Chinese archeologists last August. The painting, 1.2 metres long and 1.1 metres wide, is believed to be the earliest discovered in China, according to an archeologist at a symposium on the Dadiwan Culture held in Lanzhou, Gansu Province.

The Dadiwan Culture was discovered in the late 1950s at the site of that name in Qin'an County, Gansu Province. Excavations started in 1978, and so far Gansu archeologists have found 240 dwellings, 342 middens, 79 tombs and some 8,000 artefacts. The picture was drawn on the floor of one dwelling with carbon black. In the centre is a male figure with long hair, crossed legs and hands holding stick-like objects. On his right is another figure which resembles a walking woman. Underneath them are two animals.

Experts at the symposium thought that the painting had a ritual significance.

The Quanzhou International Puppet Show Festival

The Quanzhou International Puppet Show Festival was held in September, 1986. At the one-week festival, artists from Austria, Britain, Japan, Democratic Germany, the Philippines and Hongkong presented their puppet shows, which were well received by the Chinese audiences.

China to Hold Art Festivals

The Chinese Ministry of Culture has decided to hold national art festivals to stimulate the development of the arts in everyday life and expand the influence of Chinese art in the world.

The festival is to be held every two years, the first in Beijing in June, 1987. Each will be sponsored jointly by the Cultural Ministry and the local government where it is held. The best programmes will receive awards from the Ministry. The China Art Festival will have its permanent insignia, medals and songs.

The 370th Anniversary of Tang Xianzu's Death

The year 1986 was the 370th anniversary of the death of Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), one of the greatest dramatists of ancient China. To commemorate him, meetings and academic seminars were held, and his plays were restaged in Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Guangdong.

Tang Xianzu had many gifts, particularly for poetry, literature and history, but he owes his reputation today mainly to his dramas. His plays *The Purple Hairpin*, *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Southern Tributary State* and *The Dream of Handan* are well-known in China and have greatly influenced later writers. They have been translated into English, French, German and Japanese.

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Panda Books

(Forthcoming Titles)

The Vixen

by Mao Dun

A collection of twenty-one stories and essays by the well-known novelist Mao Dun, author of *Midnight* and one of the foremost masters of modern Chinese fiction, who was also the late minister of culture. Mao Dun's revelation of the vicissitudes in the lives of the down-trodden people of the old days is skilfully wrought and touching.

Poetry and Prose of the Ming and Qing

The Ming and Qing represented a high tide in Chinese literary creation. Many writers, such as Liu Ji, Gui Youguang, Tang Xianzu and Yuan Hongdao produced numerous masterpieces in different styles, reflecting a diversity of thought and feeling. This collection contains parables, drama, legends, biography, stories of the supernatural and poetry.

How Mr Pan Weathered the Storm

by Ye Shengtao

Ye Shengtao is an influential writer, educator and publisher. His short stories of the 20s and 30s are chiefly notable for their portrayal of growing sense of the inadequacy of contemporary social conditions both in the towns and cities and in the countryside.

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